

## Thrift stores highlight messiness of real charity

Heidi Schlumpf | Jan. 25, 2011



Clothes for sale at a St. Vincent de Paul thrift store in Kansas City, Mo. (NCR photo/Toni-Ann Ortiz)

I have a confession to make: I shop at thrift stores. Yes, the places where normal people donate their used clothes and household items.

It started out as a source of craft supplies (fabric, knitting needles and 100 percent wool sweaters I washed, felted and turned into purses). While there, I browsed the baby clothes and picked up some almost-new outfits and lots of books for our children. And when money got tight, I decided to forgo my favorite Ann Taylor Loft sale for some thrifted Banana Republic pants -- for only \$2.

Thrift stores have always been a source of funky clothes for college kids, vintage or antique finds for collectors, and Halloween costumes for all. But the recent recession has sent more than a few middle-class folks to places they can get the most for their money, and increasingly that means rummage sales or thrift stores. Buying used no longer has the stigma it once did. In fact, it's acquired a green stamp of approval as part of the "Reduce, reuse, recycle" trilogy.

Although some in the aisles at Goodwill, Salvation Army and St. Vincent de Paul are those who could afford to shop elsewhere, the majority of thrift-store shoppers are people who will never set foot in Macy's or Williams-Sonoma. They buy used socks and underwear because they cannot afford new. Many of them cannot even afford the used ones.

They are the homeless, the underemployed, the formerly incarcerated. They seem to have the worst luck, suffering layoffs, evictions, foreclosures, serious illness, divorce or death of a family member -- often more than one of these catastrophic events in a few weeks.

To most of society, they are outcasts. To Jane Knuth, they are saints, people who challenge her comfortable, middle-class spirituality and give her surprising, often uncomfortable insights into her faith, her politics and her own life.

In *Thrift Store Saints: Meeting Jesus 25¢ at a Time* (Loyola Press), Knuth describes how she reluctantly agreed 13 years ago to volunteer at a St. Vincent de Paul thrift store, where her experiences proved true the Vincentian

tenet that the poor are our teachers.

She honestly confesses her failings -- her initial condescending judgment of the store's disorganized management, her fear of customers with untreated mental illness or criminal backgrounds, her frustration with donors who try to unload worthless junk. Like many of us, Knuth would rather pontificate about the problem of poverty in America than help individual poor people face-to-face.

But that is exactly what she ends up doing.

At St. Vincent de Paul, selling used clothing is merely a "cover" to give away the profits to pretty much anyone who comes in with a request. On any given day, Knuth writes checks to people about to be evicted or lose their heat, gives away clothing to a recent parolee so he's not easily identified by the prison-issue going-away outfit, and offers a warm blanket to a homeless woman whose silent stare reveals her hopeless resignation.

Or she and her fellow volunteers close the store to give a lift to a mother who needs to bring her sick child to the hospital, or she drags her husband along to one of the city's sketchier neighborhoods to deliver a bed to a bedless-but-bedridden woman. "Let us go to the poor," said Blessed Frederic Ozanam, who founded the Society of St. Vincent de Paul as a student in Paris in 1833.

Today the society has chapters in 139 countries. In the United States, some 129,000 members serve more than 12 million people annually, according to the society's Web site ([svdpusa.org](http://svdpusa.org) [1]).

Knuth learns -- from the senior citizens who are the store's backbone volunteers, from the grateful and sometimes not-so-grateful recipients of the society's proceeds, even from the despised "bed broker" who buys rarely donated beds and resells them at a profit -- that real charity is hard.

It's not enough to "recycle" or give away things you no longer need or want so others can benefit from them. It's not even that admirable to "share" by giving of your resources but not to the point of suffering yourself. True charity, as volunteer Bess explains, is when you only have one fan on a very hot day, but you give it to someone else.

Knuth knows that much of what goes on at St. Vincent de Paul is recycling and sharing. It's also what most comfortable Catholics prefer to do. Earthquake or tsunami halfway around the world? We pray and get out our checkbooks, but don't exactly hop on a plane to pull people out of the mud.

It's that kind of messiness that Knuth has spent considerable effort most of her life to avoid.

"I prefer to help people when they are calm, courteous and grateful," writes Knuth, a math teacher by trade. "I say to myself, 'After they get things cleaned up, after the chaos is under control, if they need to learn a little about the Pythagorean theorem then I'm on it.'"

But there's no avoiding the messiness at the thrift store. The donations are often dirty; so are the clients.

Knuth admits she had hoped she could get to heaven by reading books about God. "Theology is talking about God when God is not in the room," she quotes Latvian pastor Juris Rubenis. At the thrift store, Knuth learns, God is in the room. And she's wearing used clothes.

[Heidi Schlumpf is the author of *While We Wait: Spiritual and Practical Advice for Those Trying to Adopt* (ACTA Publications).]

**Support independent reporting on important issues.**



---

**Source URL (retrieved on 07/26/2017 - 08:10):** <https://www.ncronline.org/news/thrift-stores-highlight-messiness-real-charity>

**Links:**

[1] <http://svdpusa.org>

[2] <https://www.ncronline.org/donate?clickSource=article-end>