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My brief experience as a homeless man

Tony Magliano | Feb. 17, 2014 Making a Difference

For quite some time, I have had an interest in the plight of the homeless. I have read about it, prayed over it, and done small things to help.

But feeling that I could, and should, do more to make a difference, I concluded that living as a homeless man -- at least for a very brief period -- was the best way to understand what it's like to have no place to call home.

I decided that St. Vincent de Paul Catholic Church on the fringe of downtown Baltimore would be my first stop.

Since the parish opens its basement to homeless people every Friday for a hot meal and allows them to stay in the small park adjacent to the church, St. Vincent's was symbolically a very good place to start my day as a homeless man.

After praying before the Blessed Sacrament, I hit the subfreezing streets with no money.

After walking several blocks, I reached Our Daily Bread Employment Center, a comprehensive facility run by Catholic Charities dedicated to supporting efforts of homeless people to secure stable employment and housing.

There, I got into a line of men, women and children waiting to be admitted into the dining room, where a free hot meal is served every day.

Once inside, I sat at a table with a young man who said he was trying to recover from drug addiction and was homeless as a result.

From there, I walked to Health Care for the Homeless, an organization dedicated to providing free medical care to people who have no permanent residence and would otherwise go untreated. Inside were approximately 75 homeless women and men waiting to be seen by a nurse. There, I spoke with an older man who had serious family problems that caused his homelessness.

Next, I stopped at a hotel and fast-food restaurant, asking if they were hiring. They were not.

From there, I walked the streets of downtown Baltimore asking people -- like some homeless people do -- for a little loose change to buy a cup of coffee.

I politely approached approximately 35 people. About 30 of them ignored me, said they didn't have any money, or simply said no. And I almost got arrested for approaching a police officer who sternly warned me that panhandling was a crime in Baltimore.

But five people did offer me a small donation. I explained what I was doing and thankfully declined their generosity.

Asking strangers for a small favor was a humbling experience.

Next stop was the Helping Up Mission, a multiservice, nondenominational shelter where homeless men can do laundry and get a shower, needed clothes, a clean bed, and a good supper and breakfast. But unfortunately, there was not enough room for everyone who came that cold evening.

At the mission, I talked with men of various ages who were down on their luck, had supper with them and attended an inspiring Protestant chapel service.

Later that night, as I walked back to my vehicle, I realized I was a richer person for having lived one day as a homeless man.

I thought about the homeless men and women I encountered and their monumental problems. And I more clearly understood God's call to each of us, our church and our government to work for the day when every human being has a decent place to call home.

[Tony Magliano is an internationally syndicated social justice and peace columnist. He is available to speak at diocesan or parish gatherings about Catholic social teaching. His keynote address, "Advancing the Kingdom of God in the 21st Century," has been well received by diocesan gatherings from Salt Lake City to Baltimore. Tony can be reached at tmag@zoominternet.net [1].]

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