

The Challenge of Charity Op-Ed piece for the *Baltimore Sun*

Ten years ago, St. Vincent de Paul Catholic Church acquired the park that lies at the foot of the Jones Falls Expressway. In an agreement with the city, the Baltimore Archdiocese, and the Maryland Historic Trust, we agreed to keep the park as a park. When it became private, we allowed homeless people to sleep there. Now, twelve to eighteen people sleep in the park on any given winter night. Others visit during the day. And many people come to the park to donate food or clothing. Our park has become a visible sign of homelessness in Baltimore City.

Although we believe not one person should sleep on the street, we know that we cannot tell someone with no housing options to “move on.” However, our small parish has paid a dear price. We relinquished our only green space and tolerate trash and crowds. It would be far more comfortable to post “No Trespassing” signs, replant grass and flowers, and reclaim our property. However, we find ourselves challenged to live a Christianity that cannot ignore the world’s brokenness, and challenged to find meaning in a faith that reaches out to those in despair.

Providence gave Baltimore a mayor who sees the human dimension of homelessness and has committed resources to it. Moreover, Mayor Dixon reached out through her Division of Homeless Services (BHS) to partner with us in addressing the needs of the homeless in the park. Since the partnership started last year, our volunteer staff has identified over 100 persons in the park, ascertaining the needs of many and linking them to services. Through BHS and others, twelve people are now housed and another dozen have housing vouchers.

There are many who care. Our Daily Bread provides a midday meal. The Salvation Army, Loyola University students, Bridgeway Community Church in Columbia, and New Psalmist Baptist Church in Baltimore bring suppers. Our Lady of the Fields Catholic Church provides a hot supper every Friday in our church hall. The St Vincent de Paul Society placed a collection bin in the park to keep donated clothing clean and dry. We also have a free clothing program. Epic Church of Canton co-funds a portable toilet. We support a part-time park liaison who enlists residents in cleaning. Parishioner volunteer teams regularly remove mildewed and dirty discarded clothes, wet bedding, and uneaten food. We posted a sign noting that only authorized donations are permitted.

But cold weather, media coverage, and Christmastime produced a tsunami of food and clothes brought by people who ignored our sign and our efforts. Such donations may seem to be a perfect solution for leftover food and clothes. But excess food draws rats and the “feel good” response enjoyed by donors is not shared by park residents who, although they always gratefully receive, tell us of their feeling of being “fed like dogs.” Every month hundreds of pounds of ruined clothes go to the City incinerator. This surplus and waste contributes not to the health and well-being of those in the park but to the erosion of their dignity.

We beg good-hearted people to continue to be generous while becoming more discerning. Do not bring food or clothing to the park. Instead, support the agencies that give directly to the homeless and help them to a better life: Healthcare for the Homeless, Our Daily Bread, Salvation Army, the St. Vincent de Paul Society, Beans and Bread, Helping Up Mission, the Maryland Food Bank, and the new United Way Fund. Finally, we urge you to get your faith communities involved with us as active members of the Archdiocesan Beyond the Boundaries Program and the Baltimore Regional Initiative for Genuine Equality (BRIDGE), organizations committed to inclusionary, affordable housing. Nobody belongs on the street in America. We *are* our brother’s keeper.

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