



Almsgiving: *Discovering Christ's presence in those who suffer*

By Julie McCarty

I encountered Christ the other day, while my car was stopped at one of those long traffic lights at a freeway exit ramp. He was standing at the side of the road, a polite distance from the car ahead of me, holding a cardboard sign with writing I could not make out—except for the giant word “HELP!”

Christ saw me, but I did not see Him. All I saw was a beggar, wrapped from head to toe, only his eyes showing, bracing himself in the sub-zero wind. Inside my warm car, I thought all sorts of judgmental thoughts, wondering why he wasn't inside, why he wasn't working, why he wasn't going to the “proper places” for help.

Another side of my brain was arguing with these thoughts. Having volunteered for a very short time to work with the homeless, I *knew* why he wasn't inside. I was aware that some people don't have the “right requirements” for assistance. I remembered how this same frigid wind had burned my cheeks just two days before. And I saw a bag of dried raisins and cherries sitting on the seat beside me.

I kept this inward debate going so long that the light turned green. Relieved, I went on my merry way, home to a warm house, a hot dinner, and a loving husband.

When I powered up my computer the following morning, I saw my next writing assignment sitting on my desk, a column about—of all things!—almsgiving. *What have I done?* I thought. I couldn't even hand over a two-dollar pouch of dried fruit to a beggar freezing in the Minnesota cold!

Jesus was no stranger to poverty. Born in a humble stable and raised by working class parents, Jesus knew firsthand what it was to struggle for survival. His family knew the trials of fleeing a country to live in a foreign land (Egypt) in order to save their baby. As an adult preacher, Jesus wandered on foot from place to place, sleeping outdoors, with “nowhere to rest his head” (Matt. 8:20; Luke 9:58).

As an adult, Jesus did not only serve the poor and suffering, he *identified* with them. So great was his solidarity that he declared all who tend the poor are also tending to the needs of Christ (Matt. 25:31-46). The very first Christians so believed this that they sold personal property to give to those most in need (Acts 2:45). They realized what St. Basil the Great would teach later in history: “The bread you store up belongs to the hungry; the cloak that lies in your chest belongs to the naked; the gold you have hidden in the ground belongs to the poor.”

When we see great suffering in modern times, we may wonder if God really cares for us. But Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta saw it a different way: “If sometimes our poor people have had to die

of starvation,” she wrote, “it is not because God didn’t care for them, but because you and I didn’t give, were not instruments of love in the hands of God, to give them that bread, to give them that clothing; because we did not recognize him, when once more Christ came in distressing disguise—in the hungry man, in the lonely man, in the homeless child, and seeking for shelter. God has identified himself with the hungry, the sick, the naked, the homeless. . .”

Lent is a time for seeking out those who suffer and doing what we can to provide for their needs. We look for Christ in the faces of those who some people scorn: the prisoner, the immigrant, the sick, the unwed mother, the homosexual or lesbian, the guy from the “other side” of political or religious disputes, and the hidden face of the unborn. We do what we can to alleviate suffering immediately *and* work to change unjust laws or unfair social structures. We seek to love our so-called enemy, as Jesus taught us to do. In showing mercy and compassion, we discover Christ in his “distressing disguise,” the face of the homeless man at the freeway exit.

