

052007 WITHOUT A HOME

A few years back I participated in the ordination Mass at the Cathedral Basilica of Saints Peter and Paul on Logan Circle. It is a great blessing on our church each year to have these young men join the ranks of the presbyters here in Philadelphia. On the way from the car to the Cathedral Father Thomas and I passed a small park with some trees and a few small benches and some grass. In the park were various people and on one bench were two homeless men. How do I know that they were homeless? I noticed that each had two bags full of items. That is often a clue. I noticed the way they were dressed and the look of their faces and their overall demeanor. They weren't panhandling. As a matter of fact one of the men had a newspaper in his hands which he had spread wide in front of him. I could not tell if he was reading the want ads or the sports pages or even if the paper was Saturday's paper or not.

What struck me was the incongruity of it all. I guess that there is just a part of me that was surprised to see a homeless man reading a newspaper like anybody else on a bench in the park. As I reflected it occurred to me that I have a stereotype of homeless people and it didn't include them reading the paper to catch up on the latest in today's news. I imagine I am not alone in having a stereotype of the homeless. Perhaps one such stereotype is to see them as dangerous or perhaps as a nuisance. Maybe we see them primarily as a police problem or a city problem or just a problem to be solved. Perhaps we see the homeless as victims of their own addictions or their lack of ambition. Perhaps we think that their situation is their own fault if only they had made better decisions or gotten their act together. Maybe we see the homeless as mentally unstable or at least mentally ill. There may or may not be some truth in each of these stereotypes that come so easily to mind, almost without thinking.

Maybe we think that the homeless are a problem but one far away from here. After all, don't we as a parish provide casseroles for Saint John's Hospice each month for the homeless men who go there? Don't we collect items at Christmas for Project Rainbow for homeless women and their children? But it seems to me that there are a couple of things that we need to remember. First off is this. Homeless people are just that, they are people, human beings like you and me. Second, there are more homeless women than men. It's just that the men are more visible on the streets of our city. Third, the homeless are by no means limited to the streets of Philadelphia.

There are homeless people right here in Ambler. It's just that for the vast majority of us they are invisible. We don't see them and we don't know how to help them. There have been homeless people right in our own parish, people who have lost their homes and literally had no place to go. There was no safety net. There are presently homeless people right here in Ambler. Saint Anthony's is part of what is known as the Interfaith Hospitality Network. This Network invites the various houses of worship in our area to open their doors to house homeless families for a month at a time. Saint Anthony's is involved and most recently we have twinned with Saint Matthew Episcopal Church on Tennis Avenue. We need more of our parishioners to help out. Some provide one night's dinner, others drive and still others spend an overnight. If you can help then I ask you to call the Rectory and leave your name for Deacon Dave Jones and we will help you to get involved.

Right down the street from First Presbyterian Church and Rita's Water Ice, and around the corner from Saint Joseph's, is housing called Hope Gardens. Inside are eight apartment units that provide places to live for homeless families. They can stay for up to eighteen months and there are a variety of kinds of services provided so that these people can get back on their feet. We support one of the units with a check each month. We have had parish families live there for a time. But for most of us most of the time the homeless are invisible. For most of them they do not want to be identified as "homeless." They are often people going through a very rough patch in their lives. It may be their own fault or it may not be their fault at all. It may involve bad decisions or bankruptcy or addictions gone awry. But even if it is one of these things they are still people and they still need our help.

At a recent meeting of the Wissahickon Faith Community Association, our local Ministerium, we discussed the needs of the homeless in our area and we all concluded that there just was not enough known by our congregations about this situation right here in our midst. Because of that we decided as a group to preach in all our houses of worship on this situation and place before you, our people, the plight of these women and children and men to increase your awareness and to help break down some stereotypes. Why? The answer comes straight from tonight's gospel: Father that they all may be one, as you Father are in me and I in you. That they all may be one is us." This can only happen if we truly open our eyes to see around us what is right there to be seen.