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Shelter the homeless

Bishop John T. Folda

Just a few weeks ago, we celebrated the birth of Jesus in a humble stable. But Mary and Joseph took refuge in a stable because there was no room for them in the inn. They were, in a very real sense, “homeless.” Imagine the worry of Joseph as he sought a place for his wife and soon-to-be-born son. No doubt he was relieved to finally find a place, rough though it was, where he could provide shelter for Mary and the infant Jesus.

I suspect we all would like to think that we would have given them a place to stay in their moment of need. But we should never forget that the plight of Mary and Joseph is lived out night after cold night in our own time and in our own communities. The homeless are among us, and they yearn for a place to rest, to be warm and to be safe.

During this Year of Mercy, Pope Francis urges us to give particular attention to the spiritual and corporal works of mercy, and one of these is “to welcome the stranger,” or “shelter the homeless.” Mercy is nothing else than an act of love and compassion for those in need. When we practice mercy, we become more like Christ, who is “mercy incarnate.” Pope Francis urges us to be “merciful like the Father.” And Jesus himself tells us, “Whatever you did for the least of my brethren, you did for me.” To do works of mercy, no matter how small, is to imitate Jesus and to bring his loving presence to our brothers and sisters in the world. Perhaps we don’t see the homeless in our own local areas, and certainly homelessness is not prevalent everywhere. But even though the homeless may be far away and invisible to us, their plight still should matter to us. Paul tells us that we are all one body in Christ, and when one member of the body suffers, we all suffer. When one member is lifted up, we all are lifted up.

We might assume that most homeless people are single men and women. But it might surprise many of us to discover the number of families with young children who are homeless. There is a growing need for space for such families, who have very specific needs. And when the shelters are full, it is heartbreaking to have to turn away parents with children who have no place to rest in warmth and safety. Most of us have never had to wonder where we would spend the night, or where we would go the night after that. But this is a burning question for those who have no home of their own.

I recently visited Blessed Sacrament parish in West Fargo during the week after Thanksgiving, when they take in those who have no other place in the local shelters. Every year for many years, the pastor and people of Blessed Sacrament have welcomed men and women to get a good meal and spend the night at the church. Other parishes in the area also pitch in with volunteers and resources. And later this month, St. Mary’s Cathedral in Fargo will do the same. I am deeply edified by the willingness of our people to assist those who have nowhere else to go, and I am sure there are other parishes in our diocese that also do what they can to assist the homeless.

When he visited Washington D.C. last September, Pope Francis addressed this very issue. “And those of us who do have a home, a roof over our heads would do well to ask: Why do these, our brothers and sisters, have no place to live? Why are these brothers and sisters of ours homeless? There is no social or moral justification, no justification whatsoever, for lack of housing.” Our Holy Father frequently urges us to put aside indifference, and to do all we can to help those in our midst who are less fortunate.

We might not be in a position to provide a place of shelter for the homeless, but perhaps we can help those who do. We can all support the parishes and other organizations that provide shelter, or perhaps we can make an offering to pay for a night’s lodging in a motel when no other places are available. I would invite you to do what you can, in your own situation, to assist those who are alone and homeless. If you wish to make a contribution to this work of mercy, you can send it to me at the Diocese of Fargo Pastoral Center, 5201 Bishops Blvd., Suite A, Fargo, ND 58104. With the help of Catholic Charities, I will make sure that your contribution goes to one of the many places throughout our diocese where the homeless receive assistance. Simply mark your envelope, “Shelter the Homeless.”

As we begin a New Year and continue on our way through the Jubilee Year of Mercy, I wish each of you every grace and blessing. And I pray that we will become “people of mercy” who notice and respond to the needs of our brothers and sisters.