

Saying 'no' to Christ

Joshua J. McElwee | Sep. 16, 2009 NCR Today



Joshua McElwee, 22, of San Jose, California, is a new addition to the

NCR newsroom where he does reporting and layout work two days a week. When he is not at NCR he is at the nearby Holy Family Catholic Worker house where this year he is a Lasallian volunteer. In the coming weeks you will see fruits of his NCR labor. For now, to get started, he offers a reflection on his initial experiences at Holy Family. -- Tom Fox

For the past two months I've been living at the Holy Family Catholic Worker House in Kansas City, Missouri. I am serving as a Lasallian Volunteer, one of many post-college youths placed across the nation in community with Christian Brothers to empower the impoverished.

The primary ministry of our house is to serve dinner six nights and breakfast four mornings a week. The meals are open; anyone can come to find food and fellowship. Many of our guests are people experiencing homelessness or the trials of living on unlivable wages.

So many things amaze me about this ministry: the sheer number of volunteers dedicated to giving up time to help cook and serve; the incredibly enduring spirit of our guests, who have been through so much; the support of other local communities who understand the trials of such an undertaking as ours.

Many things also overwhelm me. Everyday more than a hundred people come through our front door, each with equally important needs: to drink some clean water, to find assistance with costs of medications, to pay for local bus passes, to simply have someone listen sit and listen to them. There are many times when I find myself surrounded by people asking for help, as if stuck in the middle of a never-ending storm of the intensely personal trials of poverty.

One thing in particular challenges me. Simply because of the ratio of guests to volunteers it's inevitable that some of these people will be neglected, unheard, or treated in a manner that we would not consider right or fair in our lives. Worse, some of these people may simply be told "no?" a person without the money for our half-priced bus passes may be told they are out of luck, a person who desperately needs help with a prescription but has used up their voucher for the month may be left with no option but to live with their illness until then.

Each of these people we say "no?" to is unique and important. Each has much to teach us about life. And, if we are to take the scriptures as meaning what they say, each of these people is Christ ? representing the divine

presence here on Earth.

So, at least in some way, we say no to the Lord when we refuse the bus pass or the prescription voucher. Yet, how else can we function? We are only a few dealing with the problems of so many. We only provide small, temporary and personal solutions as we wait for society's more complete response to the prevalence of poverty.

Perhaps this witness to society and one another can justify our need to say no. Or, at least provide us with some solace each time we do.

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