NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Faith calls for being silly, naive in order to be Christ-like

Bill Tammeus | Aug. 21, 2013 A small c catholic

A Catholic priest friend of mine -- well, he's a monsignor, but he wears the title lightly -- recently had cause to ask himself this: "Am I silly? Am I naïve? Or am I Christ-like?"

It's a question we all might do well to ask ourselves.

In the case of Bob (not the priest's real name), the question arose because of financial support he's been giving personally to a former prisoner now trying to make it on the outside.

When it looked as if the prisoner -- married with several children -- badly needed help with money while incarcerated, Bob began sending him $20 a month. Now that the man has been released, Bob has doubled his monthly support and helped the man and his family with some necessities that allow the man's wife to keep her minimum-wage job and keep the young children clothed and fed.

The man seems to be making progress, and an end to Bob's out-of-pocket donations is in sight. But through it all, Bob has wondered whether he should have become so personally involved, knowing that it's impossible with everyone, given the large number of needy people he meets regularly in his priestly work.

My response to Bob after he shared his story was that I would rather be considered silly or naïve than un-Christ-like.

That said, Bob's situation has caused me to think again about how we do charitable giving [1] and whether sometimes we avoid personal involvement when we shouldn't or get involved personally at the wrong times.

I generally don't give money to people who stand on corners in my city and beg. Rather, I keep in my car a six-pack of bottled water, granola bars and small sheets that list local agencies where homeless and hungry people can get help. When I can, I hand those three items to the person seeking handouts. Without fail, the people receiving my small gifts say thanks.

In my little system, which my wife talked me into, I can look someone in the eye, acknowledge his or her humanity and suggest that person find help from organizations our society has set up for that very purpose.

In these situations, I'm not sure quite what to do with the old (and sometimes silly) question of what Jesus would do. Jesus, as we know, helped individual after individual, but we also know that at times, the needs of the people overwhelmed him, and he needed to retreat.

Given how deeply poverty, hunger and homelessness have rooted themselves into American society, we have to acknowledge the impracticality of each of us who can help getting deeply involved in the lives of lots of needy people. And yet I want to honor Father Bob's decision to help this prisoner because I think the silly-naïve-or-Christ-like question is exactly the right one for us to ask.

I give money to my church [2], and my church supports efforts to solve these problems. But is that enough for

me? Is it enough for you?

Shouldn't we also be finding ways to engage needy people eyeball-to-eyeball? Shouldn't we sometimes be a healing presence in their lives and not just a check-writer to the soup kitchen where they get lunch on Fridays?

Yes, we should. And I have to remind myself that I already am personally trying to help one current and one former inmate. I also volunteer weekly at a facility for AIDS patients. I know almost all of them by name now, and they know me. And I do some volunteer work at a public school, reading with students individually.

So though I don't run around handing out money to poor people walking the streets, I can balance a collective approach with personal involvement and, like Father Bob, risk being silly and naïve in an effort to be Christ-like. And so can you. Indeed, that's exactly what this hard-to-live faith calls us to do.

[Bill Tammeus, a Presbyterian elder and former award-winning faith columnist for *The Kansas City Star*, writes the daily "Faith Matters" blog [3] for the *Star*'s website and a monthly column for *The Presbyterian Outlook*. His latest book, co-authored with Rabbi Jacques Cukierkorn, is *They Were Just People: Stories of Rescue in Poland During the Holocaust [4]*. Email him at wtammeus@gmail.com [5].]

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