

# Box Seats

## A View from the Steps



Dear friends of the Step Ministry,

Thank you so very much for your generosity over the holiday season. This was the 6<sup>th</sup> year we have provided motel rooms and food vouchers for our guests on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. Because of your compassion and concern for the poorest and most vulnerable among us, there was indeed “room at the Inn.”

This winter we have noticed that more “newly” homeless are coming to the courtyard in search of shelter. Some have just been locked out of their apartments and arrive with only the clothes on their backs – no bedding, no backpack. One chilly evening a young man came to the gate carrying the only personal possession he was able to save – his laptop computer. When we told him that there may not be an available spot for him to sleep in that night, his eyes filled with tears and he asked, “If I can’t stay here, where can I go? What will I do?”

How one’s heart breaks for this young man. How powerless one feels when confronted with the scope of the tragedy of homelessness. The enormity of the task at hand can seem overwhelming. It is at these times that we must remember the spirit captured by the following words of Archbishop Oscar Romero which encourage us to continue to walk in hope and faith that even the smallest actions of a determined spirit can help bring grace to the world.

Peace and all good to you,

***Nora Sanguinetti***

We plant seeds that one day will grow.

We water seeds already planted knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that need further development.

We provide yeast that produces effects beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.

This enables us to do something and to do it very well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way,  
an opportunity for God’s grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results

but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are the workers, not master builders, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.

## WHAT IS IT LIKE TO BE HOMELESS?

In her job as a Case Manager, Paula Dyan, MA, CCHT had the opportunity to ask 33 women participating in a homeless women's dinner program in Washington, DC, what it was like to be homeless. Many of these women had been recently evicted. Following are some of their responses.

- You begin to feel rootless. Exposed, naked, alienated.
- You spend all day looking for hot meals, a place to sit without being told to “move on”, somewhere to take care of bathroom needs, and a dry, quiet, warm space to sleep.
- There are no safe places to store belongings.
- Opportunities become elusive.
- Discrimination against the poor, especially the homeless, makes it harder to take care of grooming, or more complicated tasks like securing employment with living wages.
- Even getting a glass of water is a challenge. Nobody wants you around.
- You walk everywhere. Public transportation and laundry-mats are non-existent; they cost money.
- It's difficult to get a job when you're homeless. Employers look at you askance when they discover you live at “no fixed address”.
- If you reside in a shelter, you share a shower and toilet with something like 10 to 25 people. There is no privacy. Many shelters are chaotic, dirty, dangerous environments with rigid schedules.
- You sleep uneasily among a room full of people: the mentally ill, substance abusers, combative jerks, thieves, mothers with children, people with AIDS or tuberculosis.
- The longer a person remains homeless, the more difficult it is to return to the mainstream of society.
- Being homeless is destabilizing, demoralizing, depressing.
- You've lost your base, a foundation from which to function.
- Constant obstacles chip away at your self esteem, and your normal healthy personality withers and disintegrates.
- You become scared, frustrated, angry, bitter, distrustful.
- You're always tired, overwhelmed. Little tasks become chores as depression saps your energy.
- You grab at anything that looks like an opportunity, yet you feel like you're getting nowhere.



The Christ of the Bread Line by *Fritz Eichenberg*

## THE CHURCH

by Jack, 1999

(one of the "original" Step guests)

Saint Francis Church – What a pretty building it is!  
As one of the wandering ones, I marvel at its beauty,  
its architecture. It's pleasing to the eyes inside as well.

I enjoy looking up at the bell towers,  
especially when the moon is full –  
shining with all her brilliant light –  
she's usually up in the East sky at the time.

Of course it's a beautiful church – who can doubt it?  
She looks as sturdy as a rock sitting there at 26<sup>th</sup> and K.

You won't see this church blown down by the strongest winds of a hurricane or tornado.

Yet with all her beauty of the outer skin, what is most important are the people inside: How they worship; how they pray; how they make it all come together as a church.

They are the magnificent ones as they should be.



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## ENCOUNTERING THE SCOURGED CHRIST

*They complained. They whined. They borrowed money and never paid me back.  
Was I really supposed to see an image of Christ in these guys?*

By Jack Smith, from *Godspy.com* (2-27-06)

Many years ago, for reasons I won't bother you with, I was afforded the opportunity to perform twenty hours of community service at the charity of my choice. After putting it off until the last minute, I chose the Missionaries of Charity AIDS hospice, then in San Francisco. It was close to my girl friend's apartment.

I wasn't very eager, but the sisters welcomed me. My first responsibility was to drive the sisters to Project Open Hand and pick up food to be distributed to shut-in AIDS sufferers at 6th Street and Tenderloin flophouses. Considering the neighborhoods they were serving, I was also an unofficial bodyguard. I'm six foot two and over 200 pounds and the sisters range at the lower end of five feet. These women didn't need any bodyguard, though. They're strong and held their own in any situation. My twenty hours ran out, but I couldn't stop coming back. I wanted to see the sisters. The main reason the sisters do what they do is that they see an image of Christ in all of the people they serve, especially the poorest of the poor.

After my twenty hours were over, my main responsibility was to hang out with the men to talk and smoke, and drive them to the hospital for treatment.

At the entrance to the room where I hung out with the men, the sisters had a poster of Christ. It was a terribly graphic representation of Him after the scourging. He wasn't the strong and serene "Good Shepherd", and He wasn't the glorious risen Christ with five vague symbolic wounds. Chunks of flesh were ripped out of His body by the scourging. Blood was flowing and he was sorrowful. A caption read, "I thirst." It bothered me whenever I saw it and I thought, sarcastically, "How lovely!"

I certainly saw an image of Christ in the sisters, but getting to know the men, I struggled to find an image of Christ in them. They were a cantankerous bunch. They complained about the sisters. They complained about

their medical treatment. They convinced me to buy them cigarettes and other things with no intention of paying me back. I listened to them whine endlessly, to and from the hospital. I often had to make side-trips on the way back from hospital in order to visit a favorite restaurant or bookstore. They complained about me, and I complained about them. Some of them had horrible stories. One had abandoned his wife and children and had acquired AIDS picking up young male prostitutes on Polk Street.

I went with the sisters once to visit a man whom I got along with particularly well. He was committed to the psych-ward at S.F. General because he had tried to commit suicide twice. The sisters couldn't keep him in their residence, but they still wanted to visit him. I brought him a carton of Marlboros.

A young short Hispanic sister told me as we were waiting for the elevator to go to the dreaded fourth floor, very sincerely and in a heavy accent, "You are building a crown for yourself in heaven which can never be taken away no matter what you do." I thought to myself, "Whatever, sister! I just drove you here and bought him some cigs."

I got to know most of the men well and enjoyed their company despite the dementia that had settled into a number of them in the last stages of their disease. There was fulfillment in my work, but not the kind the sisters had. I felt I was fulfilling my duties to Christian charity, but not that I was actually serving images of the scourged Christ.

One day I was asked to come by and take a man to the hospital whom I'd never spoken to before. Some other volunteers carried him down the steps and placed him in the passenger seat of my Chevy Blazer.

I drove him alone to S.F. General and he spent most of the time thanking me and telling me how important prayer had become in his life. By the look of him, that life was about to end and I had no expectation of taking him home from the hospital. I don't know what his story was or how he arrived in the position he was in. He had a growth the size of a baseball in his groin, he couldn't walk, he was gaunt and in pain.

I paid little attention and was fearing our arrival at the hospital, because I knew I would have to lift him out of my high SUV seat to put him in his wheelchair. On arrival, I went to lift him and was surprised at how easy it was; he was all bones. I was also surprised when I felt something wet and then looked at my car-seat as I was pulling him out. He had urinated on my seat!

He groaned a bit in pain as I lifted him down from the car and kept saying "I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry. Thank you, Thank you."

I was upset and extremely uncomfortable and then something hit me like a ton of bricks. I plopped him in his wheelchair and spun him around quickly so he wouldn't see my tears.

This greatly suffering man, soon to die, had long hair, a beard and purple splotches covering his body. I had just held the scourged Christ.

And He was lovely.

