

Half a continent away, in New York, Ken Christian met Bernice every morning and evening on his way to and from work. At first he gave her money from time to time. Eventually, he wanted to help get her off the streets.

He made some phone calls and found the names of shelters in the area. He spoke to social workers in those agencies to get clues on how to proceed. Then he approached Bernice with the idea of leaving the streets. Reluctant at first, she finally agreed to give it a try.

## Who Is My Neighbor?

Such was the question posed to Jesus in Luke's Gospel (Lk. 10:29). His answer was the story of the Good Samaritan: A man, beaten by robbers, is left for dead on a roadside. Several individuals pass him by, but the Samaritan does not. He was neighbor to this man he didn't know.

With this story, Jesus emphasized that every man and woman is neighbor to every other. Jesus also said that you must "love your neighbor as yourself." Here are some ways to do that:

■ **Contribute materially**—Drop off old clothing, shoes, eyeglasses at a neighborhood shelter. Canned goods and empty soda cans or bottles (if your state has a bottle return law) are also fine contributions. Keep informed about collection campaigns on behalf of the homeless or refugees and give what you can.

"Buck" Griffin, an Atlanta resident, each year runs a one-man clothing collection. He contacts clothing outlets and factories and then delivers his "finds" to area shelters.

A Northeast businesswoman follows a similar routine, asking bakeries for baked goods that can't be sold the next day. Then she personally hands out nourishment to the homeless in her city.

Elementary-school youngsters in some areas run "bread, bologna and mustard" drives for the homeless and, after school, turn the ingredients into sandwiches for street distribution.

■ **Give your time**—"Just visit a shelter or a soup kitchen," says the pastor of a Midwest Protestant church. "You'll find there is no shortage of things to do."

An Atlanta financial officer, Mary Joe Dellinger, spends Sunday mornings giving breakfast to that city's homeless and her evenings "being there" for homeless women in a shelter she helps to run.

Said a seminarian, who had been giving time at an upstate New York parish shelter: "Working

with these people is a real eye-opener. You don't realize how much you have, how much God has given you, and how much these people—Christ's people, each one of them—need you."

■ **Lend your talent**—Ferne Lipp, a 71-year-old resident of Denver, was moved by the problems of that city's 2,000 homeless. She and other members of NODS (Ninety On Down Seniors) made quilts and caps for them.

In Texas, some lawyers formed a cooperative offering free legal aid to refugees.

Doctors have done the same for the homeless in some areas. In Boston, for example, Dr. James O'Connell maintains a residency at Boston City Hospital and uses his off-work hours to work out of several shelters.

■ **Be an organizer**—Now in her 80s, Marie Sandvik, a Norwegian immigrant living in Minneapolis, recalls some 40 years ago taking all her savings—\$45—and renting a building to care for the city's poor and indigent; "200 drunks and 30 prostitutes" came the first night, she remembers.

Today she still gives love, food, clothing and a place to sleep to the city's homeless as well as to Laotian refugees who have settled in the area.

A New York City corporate executive recently secured large donations of funds and furnishings to open a residence for some 31 homeless families. The woman, Nancy Abraham, admits being "impatient, tenacious and not above being a pest" in this endeavor.

In Newton, Mass., a group of college students obtained permission to use an empty campus building as a home for 11 Cambodian refugees. The students then helped their "adopted" family find work and learn American ways.

■ **Play politics**—The Rev. Erskine White, pastor of the United Church of Christ in Milwaukee, advises: "Study the voting record of elected officials. Then use the information to help, for example, to change zoning laws to facilitate easier establishment of shelters for the homeless or to force slum landlords to make their buildings habitable again."

■ **Rely on prayer**—In one Southern community, church volunteers pass out food and prayer books to the area's homeless. Said volunteer Melanie Pritchett, a secretary by day, "We give them the sandwich first; they're more likely to read the prayers if they aren't hungry."

*The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself. (Lev. 19:34)*

## Compassion

*Blessed is he  
who considers the poor!*

*The Lord delivers him  
in the day of trouble;  
the Lord protects him  
and keeps him alive;  
he is called blessed in the land;  
You do not give him up  
to the will of his enemies.*

**Psalm 41:1-2**

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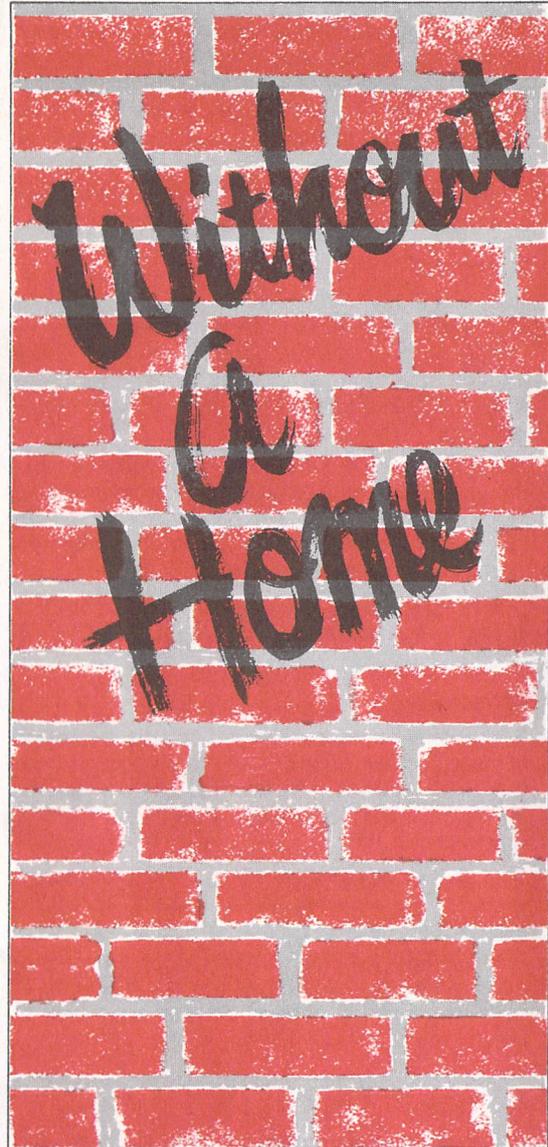
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Editorial Staff: Joseph R. Thomas, editor-in-chief, Dolores Criqui and Margaret O'Connell, associate editors. ISSN: 8755-6901

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The plight  
of the homeless  
and the refugee

**C**HRISTOPHER NEWS NOTES  
12 EAST 48th STREET NEW YORK, NY 10017  
March 1988 No. 303

The homeless. The refugee. Behind such cold impersonal words are people—two distinct groups who nevertheless are linked through the urgency of their needs. They share the same trauma Jesus of Nazareth experienced early in life.

In the following sequence, the people—Bernice and Miguel—are real and their stories are true.

### **Bernice**

A blistering winter wind blows through a Manhattan side street, causing evening commuters to pull scarves tighter and wrap coats more snugly. Huddled against the cold concrete wall of an overpass is Bernice, a woman in her late 50s.

She watches the rush-hour crowd scurry by, trying, with her myriad layers of worn clothing, to block out the frigid air. Her belongings sit beside her; everything she has in the world packed inside a battered grocery cart.

“Was robbed last night,” Bernice mutters to a young man who stops to offer help. “Can’t trust nobody. Nobody.”

### **Miguel**

At a refugee camp in Mexico, Miguel, the father of five, watches as his children line up for a single bowl of milk. Born in Guatemala, Miguel took his family from their homeland and its murderous warring.

“Can’t work, can’t plant food,” he tells a camp worker. “My wife and children have no shoes, no money for food.”

“Nothing,” he repeats helplessly as the last of his five children sips down the small portion of milk she is given. It may be the only form of nourishment she will have this day.

### **Linked Through Time . . .**

The stories of thousands like Bernice and Miguel have been told and retold throughout history. Today the homeless and the refugees are journalistic “staples,” as one news commentator phrased it—“stories and faces that do not go away.”

History supports that observation. The Jews spent 40 years wandering in the desert, a people without a home, a refugee people, fleeing the slavery and persecution they endured in Egypt.

Jesus, Himself, was both homeless and a refugee. In Luke’s Gospel, we read that Mary gave birth to Jesus, and, wrapping Him in swaddling

## **Homelessness From the Inside**

*. . . as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me. (Mt. 25:40)*

**Maryann**—Unable to find work after she lost her nursing home aide job, Maryann and her four children moved into a Detroit shelter. “My life has changed totally,” she says. “We’re sleeping with a lot of people we’re not used to. The kids keep asking me when we’re going to get out of here. I’m scared because if you don’t have food and a place to stay, they take your kids from you.”

**Yip Chyun**—a Vietnamese of Chinese ancestry, Yip Chyun and his wife embarked on a dangerous journey to Hong Kong knowing that they might be detained in a refugee camp. They were. “I used to be a soldier in Vietnam,” he says. “Last year I was imprisoned for six months. We have five children in the United States, and we want to be with them. I hope we don’t stay here too long.”

clothes, she laid Him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn (Lk. 2:7). No place for Him; no home.

Shortly after that lowly birth, the Son of God, along with His mother, Mary, and Joseph, found Himself in flight to Egypt, because an angel had appeared to Joseph, telling him to do so for safety (Mt. 2:13).

In the face of every homeless person or refugee, then, we can see Christ, who endured the same tribulations.

### **. . . United by Urgency . . .**

The number of homeless persons and refugees worldwide has grown dramatically, reaching record highs.

### **The Homeless**

A United Nations report issued in 1987, the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless, estimated that about 20 percent of the world’s population do not have adequate shelter. These are the people defined as homeless.

In the U.S. there are two to three million homeless persons; 500,000 of them under 21.

Homeless people can be found in cities and suburbs alike but are concentrated in urban

**Margaret**—A Londoner, Margaret, her husband and their six children live in a bug-infested hotel. She and her family had been evicted from a public housing project because the building was contaminated with asbestos and had to be demolished. “You wait, and wait, and wait,” Margaret says of the now-10-month-old wait for permanent housing. “If you only know how long you’d be here, you wouldn’t mind.”

**Ron**—“I’m sitting in this mission (in Des Moines, Iowa), just waiting to die. There’s nothing for me. If a car runs me over, if I freeze to death, I don’t care. People don’t understand. They think we’re proud to be here, to be winos and drunks. We ain’t proud. If I could do my life over, I would never have gone on the road.”

*Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. (Heb. 13:2)*

areas: 60,000 in New York, 50,000 in Los Angeles, 27,000 in Detroit, more than 20,000 each in Chicago, Houston and St. Louis.

But in the last three years, the number of suburban homeless doubled. In Long Island, Westchester and parts of Connecticut, for example, there are 54,000 homeless; two-thirds of that figure are families.

On the world scene, some 140,000 live in Britain’s shelters; 10,000 spend days and nights on the streets of Paris. In Calcutta, three million live in shelters and 300,000 on the streets.

### **Refugees**

In 1951, there were only about 1.5 million refugees; today, there are almost 12 million.

The largest group of refugees are from Afghanistan, more than four million.

Refugees from Africa number near three million; Asian refugees total 536,000.

### **. . . Sharing the Trauma**

Those who spend time on the street—refugee or homeless—experience similar deprivation. Speaking of the life of street youth, Father Bruce Ritter, O.F.M. Conv., founder of Covenant House, said, “The street is a brutal parent.”

It is a brutal companion as well. Its residents are:

**Without shelter**—Without a place to call home, the homeless person wandering the streets here or abroad is a “refugee in his or her own land.” For the homeless and the refugee there is no home, no bed, no bath.

**Without food**—Trash bins with leftover pieces of someone’s dinner or supermarket throwaways are sometimes the only way to alleviate the pangs of hunger.

**Without safety**—The homeless are often robbed of what little they have. They’ve also been raped, stabbed, beaten. The young are sexually exploited and all those living on the streets are susceptible to disease.

**Without peace of mind**—Miguel watches his family go without and his anguish runs deep. Mothers in shelters worry about their children, their next meal, their next pair of shoes, their future.

**Without rights**—Because most states require a street address—not a box number or a shelter address—to register to vote, the homeless are denied even that right, becoming, in effect, “non-persons.” Immigration problems are often also a part of the refugee’s plight.

Actor Martin Sheen, along with homeless advocate Mitch Snyder, whom Sheen portrayed in a television movie, organized a one-night street-sleep to call attention to the plight of the homeless.

Sheen told of the stories he heard from the homeless population. “They always start with one stroke of bad luck which leads to despair which leads to disintegration,” he said.

Said Snyder: “This (evening) is to guarantee that people across the country will wake up tomorrow thinking a little more about the homeless.”

### **Some Find Answers**

*Come to me, all who . . . are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. (Mt. 11:28)*

For Miguel and his family, relief came through Maryknoll Sister Peggy Janicki. She and other camp workers help to deliver food and other aid to the 12 refugee encampments along the Usumacinta River which stretches between Mexico and Guatemala.

As a missionary her aid was given more or less in the “line of duty.”