

Pastor's Notes: Helping the Poor in Our Community: Part 1 of 3

January 24, 2021

Many of us experience panhandlers on the street, and we often are moved to give money to people when they ask us to. I've heard from numerous people that giving money to panhandlers is a bad idea, but I wanted to understand if that was true, and if so, why. I sat down and had an interview with Dr. Jimmy Turner, Chief Operations Officer of the Community Kitchen, to ask him that very question and lots more about the best way to serve the poor amongst us. I share highlights from the interview here in my pastor's notes over the next few weeks. The full interview will be posted on the Catholic Social Teaching and Pastor's Notes pages of our [website](#).

Fr. Carter: What does the Chattanooga Community Kitchen do?

Dr. Turner: We are a social service provider that is here to meet those most basic needs of hungry, homeless and vulnerable people in our community, while also offering them a clear path to self-sufficiency.

Fr. Carter: Our faith teaches us that we have to have a special solicitude for the poor amongst us—that we are supposed to see in them Christ, because when we serve them, we serve Christ. So there's an imperative to serve the poor. But sometimes our charity lacks the prudence that it needs to truly serve our brothers and sisters who are in need. If somebody comes up to them on the street and ask them for money, is it a good idea to give them money? Or are there better ways to serve the poor?

Dr. Turner: Doing something is always better than doing nothing. You know, the Scriptures tell us that, what good have you done for somebody to see them hungry or in need and wish them well and a full belly, and do nothing to actually meet the need? I believe that the prudent thing to do is to connect people with the experts in the community who are already there for the help that they need. And so we would almost always discourage giving somebody money. Because that money can go further at an agency that has the leverage to make that dollar go further than what a single individual might be able to do with it. A great example: I shared last week on social media that the Chattanooga Community Kitchen provided nearly 175,000 meals last year in 2020. And we did it on a food budget of fewer than \$10,000.

Fr. Carter: Do you have any advice on alternate ways of interacting with the poor?

Dr. Turner: My advice is to be prepared for it. And so we can do that by, one: Stop by a fast food restaurant and pick up a \$5 gift card. And so when someone stops you and says "Hey, I'm hungry, can you give me a few dollars?" you're prepared for it. We can work together as a community, as a church, as small groups, as co-ops to say, "Hey, let's put together these little kits that we can all carry with us in our cars that have basic things that someone might need, including that gift card; things like socks and deodorant; and toothbrush and toothpaste; and a washcloth and a gift card. So that when we come across that person and they say, "Hey, I need some help; my socks are soaked," you can give them a whole bag full of things that are going to be helpful to them. And so we can do that individually; we can do that as a household; we can do that as a church community working together.

Fr. Carter: Is it a bad idea to give money?

Dr. Turner: It can be, because a portion of the people who panhandle are not homeless or in desperate need for the help that they're out there asking for. And so some people are taking advantage of a societal norm, that of seeing a panhandler and thinking they're in need, and they go and they replicate that for an opportunity to not work and just depend on the good will of misinformed people. Or they use it to know that, well, I know this person has at least \$3, and now I have an opportunity to step up and potentially rob them of anything more that they might have. Of course, the inverse of that is that we don't want people to be scared to help anybody. Because being generous to anyone or kind can open us up. But at the same time, if we take away the immediate appearance that we're going to be carrying cash on us, then we can at least mitigate ourselves as targets and make sure that even if what we give that person was taken advantage of, we took prudential steps to protect ourselves in the process.

The interview will continue in next week's pastor's notes, and the full interview will be posted to our website. Dr. Turner talks about the causes of homelessness, ways you can help at the Community Kitchen, other agencies that provide a support network, and even answers the question about how to answer honestly when you are asked for cash.

Note that this month we are supporting the work of the St. Vincent de Paul Society (whose feast day is today), which is a great way to directly support the poor in our community. If you help the St. Vincent de Paul Society or the Community Kitchen or anyone helping to feed the hungry or shelter the homeless, you are fulfilling a corporal work of mercy. In this Year of St. Joseph, Pope Francis has given a plenary indulgence to those who fulfill a work of mercy in the spirit of St. Joseph.

Rev. J. David Carter