

Traveling Companion: Lazarus' Sores

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Parish rectories are havens for people in trouble, especially people who are passing through and need a handout; people who need a prescription filled; people who need a night's accommodation; people who need a food or gas voucher; people who need help paying utility bills. Thank goodness, most parishes have a St. Vincent DePaul society that do tremendous work taking care of such needs.

Just before the Christmas holidays, a disheveled man in his mid 50's arrived at the rectory, looking for help. His story had a similar thread to many such people traveling through the area.

A native of Florida, he was working in New Orleans. While working there, his van was stolen. He contacted the police there for help but got little support or encouragement. So he took things into his own hands. He spent three days walking around the city, trying to find his van. Miraculously, he finally found it and decided to return to Florida and home.

During his three days of walking the streets of New Orleans, the inside of his thighs became charred. They were raw and infected.

He arrived at the rectory with his story, hoping for some help. He explained his problem to Jo, our secretary. Kathleen, our pastoral associate, went to the local CVS Pharmacy and talked to the pharmacist about the man's problem and asked for advice on how his raw wounds might be treated. At the suggestion of the pharmacist, she purchased the necessary bandages and ointments and arrived back at the rectory. In the meantime, our secretary had made some sandwiches and a drink for the man. She also packed some extra sandwiches and drinks for him to take with him.

The man took the food, bandages and ointments and left. As he was leaving, in a thankful mood, he said, "I am in my 50's and this should not be happening to me."

During the encounter with the gentleman, the ladies, amid the man's foul body odor, kept asking themselves, "What would Mother Theresa do in this situation?" They had their answer and followed it with action.

The story reminded me of the plight of Lazarus and his sores; how he blended in with the scenery and no one noticed his sores. It reminded me that oftentimes people's sores are not always obvious and noticed. Sometimes, they are hidden deep within the person and a cursory look will not notice them.

A few days ago, I was at the funeral home officiating at a funeral. Prior to the service an elderly woman approached me and said, "I need to come and see you some time." Then she began to tell me the rest of the story.

She lived in the Orlando area. Her husband had severe Alzheimer's disease. He was now living in a nursing home. Even though his wife went to visit him on a regular basis, he was oblivious to her presence and didn't recognize anyone who came to see him.

His wife decided that she needed a break from the stress and pressures and decided to go and see some of her family in our area over the Christmas holidays.

She was shocked when people chastised her for not staying with her husband; that she was neglecting her duties; that she mustn't love her husband; otherwise, she would have stayed in Florida with him.

Her parting comment to me was simple but poignant: "These people have no right to criticize me without first having walked a mile in my shoes."