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A Compassion that Can Stand in Awe: Exploring and Addressing Homelessness through Sociological Analyses, Narratives, and Theological Responses

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A Compassion that Can Stand in Awe: Exploring and Addressing Homelessness through
Sociological Analyses, Narratives, and Theological Responses

By

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Senior Honors Project

Fall, 2014

"Here is what we seek: a compassion that can stand in awe at what the poor have to carry rather than stand in judgment at how they carry it"

- Greg Boyle S.J.

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Introduction

I have spent nearly every Friday night of my college career in downtown Cleveland with the homeless. Through an organization at John Carroll University called The Labre Project, I found myself connecting and building friendships with people that most of society would consider dirty, crazy, less than human. I remember my first time out on Labre. At our first stop, we visited a man under a bridge, near the Cleveland Brown's stadium. Walking down the steep dirt embankment, I could hear cars on the busy road above. I wondered how many times I passed over this bridge, or bridges like it, without knowing that someone lived underneath it. Shocked at the conditions the man lived in, in Cleveland's cold weather, I was touched by the way my heart moved. Sam is a small skinny man, his eyes and smile showed that he was excited to see us. He spoke of other homeless people who lived in the area, whom he wanted to make sure we visited. Standing in front of the man in the tent, I knew instantly that I was where I needed to be. I immediately knew I was to never remain another Friday night comfortable in my dorm room.

There was a semester, however, in which I did not take part in Labre because I spent it in El Salvador. While it was a semester away from the homeless, my time in El Salvador greatly impacted my relationships with the homeless when I returned back to John Carroll. During my time in El Salvador, I learned a very important lesson, a lesson which inspired this project. I learned about the importance of stories. As I would listen to Salvadorians tell me stories about the atrocities they went through during their civil war, I realized that the best form of service I could ever give them was to listen to them and then find ways to amplify their voice. They needed someone who cared enough to listen, as for so long the world had ignored their suffering. Ever since I left El Salvador, I have had a desire to receive stories from my homeless friends in Cleveland, and to help amplify their often forgotten voice to the

world. I desire to be the listening voice they need and to help them be heard so that society will hopefully no longer ignore their suffering.

This project therefore shares the stories of many of the homeless I have met through the Labre Project. During Labre, we specifically visit those who are unsheltered. That is, we visit people who live on the streets, rather than in homeless shelters. There are many reasons why someone would chose to live on the streets instead of a shelter. Through my time out on Labre, I have learned that people avoid shelters because they find them to be dangerous or unsanitary. Often people do not like to live in crowded conditions and they fear the violence and theft that occurs in shelters. Most of the homeless who choose to live on the streets are single men. In general, men are more likely to be homeless than women. Furthermore, homeless men are more likely to be single, while homeless women are more likely to have children with them. In 2007, it was estimated that roughly 70% of the single homeless population is male (Who is homeless?, 1). Since most women who are homeless have children, they are much more likely to use shelters. Even if the women do not like how the shelters are crowded or unsafe, they do not want their children sleeping outside. This reality means that, through the Labre project, I have come into contact with significantly more men than women. This project reflects that fact. There are certainly women who are homeless, and there are certainly children who are homeless, yet, this project represents the people in our society who live completely unsheltered, and the majority of these people are single men.

This project will draw upon an integrative way of learning similar to my learning in El Salvador, in order to approach the problem of homelessness. It will use sociology, narrative, and Catholic Social Teaching to analyze the causes of homelessness, and to propose new ways of approaching homelessness. The sociological analysis and statements from homeless individuals in Cleveland will contextualize who the homeless are and how they have found themselves to be on the street. I am choosing to share stories from the homeless in order

create a space for which to hear the stories of people who are rarely heard or understood. The Catholic understanding of the phenomenon will show us how one might respond to the reality of homelessness.

My project will assess homelessness in a unique way because its research will be very inclusive. Instead of simply focusing on a homeless person's own account of why they are homeless, or examining academic research on homelessness, or understanding a religious/spiritual response to the inequality in society, my project will synthesize all three. By both using the stories of the homeless and academic research, I hope to present a different approach to the problem at hand, for as Daniel Kerr concludes in his article “We Know What the Problem Is,” “a scientific community is closer to objectivity when it is more inclusive and democratic” (31).

For this project, I have chosen to interview five homeless individuals whose pseudonyms are Adrian, Tom, Eric, Pam, and Jim. I also include in this project three stories of individuals— Sarah, Greg, and John— who were not formally interviewed, but whose stories are important to understand the complexities of homelessness. These eight individuals represent a relatively diverse sample of the unsheltered homeless; these individuals are of different races, genders, socio-economic backgrounds, and have been homeless for different lengths of time and different reasons.

Due to my small sample size the stories can only provide anecdotal evidence about the causes and experiences of homeless people as a whole. Statistics will be provided within the project from studies that had a large enough sample size to be reliable and valid. The purpose of my interviews is to complement these statistics with a human face. The stories are not to be used to represent any form of statistics. The narratives are a part of my project for us to begin to understand that homelessness is a human problem, experienced by real people, a feeling that is sometimes lost when someone solely looks at the numbers and statistics. While

it is never possible to understand the entirety of a subject, the statistics that will be used will give us a basic understanding of homelessness as a whole, and the stories I share will give us snapshots of what homelessness is like for some people who experience it.

The style and form of my project has been inspired by the book *Coal Mountain Elementary* by Mark Nowak. In this poetic book, Nowak brings to the world the reality of coal miners both in China and the U.S. He does so by creatively including a mining lesson to a group of elementary students on one page, followed by a news report about a mine explosion on the next page, and then a story of a miner or a miner's family members on the next, followed lastly by a photograph of a mine. This style of writing is engaging as it not only includes statistics about coal miners, but also puts names and faces to the miners.

After providing background information on homelessness, this project will follow a style similar to *Coal Mountain Elementary*. I will be providing theories, statistics, and societal descriptions, and then follow the sociological analysis with a story from a homeless person that individualizes the problem at hand. From there I will follow the story of a homeless person with a section recording a faith-based, spiritual understanding of the crisis. Following this section, I will share another sociological analysis, and continue the pattern. I am choosing this style of writing because it is engaging and it allows me to explore the interconnection between societal factors and individual human beings. It will also allow me to explore the "so what?" question, as I will argue that homelessness's is a spiritual crisis. I will follow this style of writing with a formal conclusion of my findings and understanding of the homeless in Cleveland.

The purpose of my project is to portray the many complexities that lead to homelessness, through the sociological analyses and narratives I share. While understanding the factors that lead to homelessness are important, I will, however, further argue that regardless of why someone is homeless, Catholic Social Teaching calls us to treat the

homeless with dignity. Treating the homeless with dignity may require us to address both the immediate needs of those on the street as well as the social structures that lead to homelessness.

Sociological Background

On a given day in Cleveland, Ohio and surrounding Cuyahoga County, there were approximately 2,200 people homeless, either living in shelters or unsheltered areas in 2012 (Campbell 1). Throughout the year of 2011, it was estimated that 22,500 individuals were at some point either living in a homeless shelter or in shared households in Cleveland (Overview of Homelessness 1). It is hard to find consistent statistics on the number of homeless people in Cleveland because homelessness can be defined in different ways. Homelessness can be considered as the state in which someone lives without a fixed residence, or whose nighttime residence is a shelter, or whose place of residence is not designed for the sleeping accommodation of human beings (Shaw 11). Often, these statistics do not include individuals sleeping in vehicles, or individuals sleeping on the couches of other homeowners (Shaw 10).

Regardless of how one wants to define homelessness, the fact remains that people without adequate housing— people living in shelters, people living under bridges, on sidewalks, in the woods, people living in cars, in abandoned buildings, and on the couches of others— exist in Cleveland. They exist, yet the average middle-class Clevelander knows very little about them. As Shaw so clearly says, “despite their geographical proximity, the homeless are as alien to many Westerners as the Gimi of New Guinea” (3).

Those who do know something about the homeless generally believe one of two theories: 1. Homelessness is based on personal flaw or 2. Homelessness is based on structural problems. The first theory is based on stereotypes about the homeless. That is, people often believe that the homeless fall into one or more of the following descriptions: they are too lazy to work, they are ex-criminals, they are drug addicts and/or alcoholics, they are mentally ill, etc (Shay 1). Most of these common stereotypes cause people to believe that people are homeless because of their own personal failings or poor choices. *Living in the Liminal: A*

Study of Homelessness in Cleveland, OH, a book by Sarah Kerr Shaw, claims that five primary archetypes exist about the homeless, which are: the bum, the addict, the nut, the unlucky, and the ex-con (20). Shaw claims that just about every homeless person falls into one of these five, rather dehumanizing, categories— four of which are often considered to be personal flaws or faults. According to Shaw, most people believe that the majority of people are homeless due their own fault, and there are facts to support this belief. By separating the homeless into distinct archetypes as Shaw has, the complexity of homelessness is lost. The mechanism also allows people to completely blame the homeless for the condition and gets in the way of people seeing the broader picture of what other factors lead to homelessness, i.e.: a lack of affordable housing, a lack of support and services for the mentally ill, for veterans, for ex-convicts, for victims of domestic violence, etc.

Other scholars look past the stereotypical causes of homelessness and claim that people are actually homeless because of the society's injustice and the inequality that persists in the U.S. Daniel R. Kerr, a scholar on homelessness in Cleveland, for example, does not see homelessness as a condition faced by people who have made poor choices, but rather as a "set of institutionalized relationships that benefit some at the expense of others" (Kerr, *Derelict Paradise* 3). His book *Derelict Paradise: Homelessness and Urban Development in Cleveland, Ohio* and his article "We Know What the Problem Is" claim that homelessness in Cleveland has been created by structural causes— including the lack of affordable housing and the structures which exist around the labor market and the prison system.

In *Derelict Paradise*, Kerr explains how since the 1950s, low-income neighborhoods in Cleveland have been transformed through urban development, as developers have desired to make Cleveland a playground for the rich. In a desire to draw the rich into the city, slum neighborhoods, cheap hotels, and Single Room Occupancy (SRO) hotels have been destroyed to make the city appear more luxurious. According to Kerr, they have been replaced with four

star hotels, athletic stadiums, universities, and upscale housing. As low-income housing has been destroyed, thousands of people have been displaced, hundreds becoming homeless. While Cleveland did not completely succeed in bringing the rich to the city, Kerr provides ample evidence for how the attempt to do so hurt the poor.

The lack of affordable housing is not only a problem in Cleveland, but a problem nation-wide. The National Coalition for the Homeless claims that in the U.S. at large, “between 1970 and 1995, the gap between the number of low-income renters and the amount of affordable housing units skyrocketed from a nonexistent gap to a shortage of 4.4 million affordable housing units” (69). Housing assistance is also at a shortage, meaning that people often must wait upwards of two years on long waiting lists (National Coalition 71).

Another main structural cause of homelessness Daniel Kerr points to is the law enforcement policy related to the “War on Drugs,” a problem for Cleveland, as well as for the nation as a whole. Beginning in the 1960s, in an effort to draw in the rich to Cleveland, by making the city “safer,” police officers began to crack down and imprison several drug dealers and drug users. The crackdown continued and increased in the 1980s. Those who were arrested were mostly those who lived in the poorer, often African American, areas of Cleveland. When these individuals were later released from prison, they were often ostracized by their families and communities and were unable to find work, a phenomenon that continues today. As the book *The New Jim Crow* accounts, “the majority of black men in major urban areas are under correctional control or saddled with criminal records for life” (About 1). Kerr claims that those who have been imprisoned, either for a drug-related reason or something more serious, are often able to find work only in the temporary labor market. Michele Alexander claims that in *The New Jim Crow* that once an African American is “labeled a felon, even for a minor drug crime, the old forms of discrimination are suddenly legal again” as these African Americans are discriminated against in the work force (About

2). Wages earned in the temporary labor market are not sustainable; those who work for temporary agencies often do not make enough money to find appropriate shelter, especially with the lack of affordable housing. While Kerr does not explicitly discuss this, the same struggle also exists for those who are generally undereducated or who are simply unable to find a stable job in a suffering economy.

The book *The Homeless* also points to other structural failings in our nation that often lead to homelessness. One of these is the lack of support for domestic violence victims. In fact, a study in 2005 showed that “50 percent of U.S. cities surveyed reported that domestic violence is a primary cause of homelessness” (American Civil Liberties 91). Women who are facing abuse often must choose between homelessness and staying with their abuser, as there is a lack of sufficient support for abused women in our society (National Coalition 72). For those parents who are homeless, and had last lived with a spouse or partner, “57 percent...had left their last residence because of domestic violence” in 1997 (American Civil Liberties 91). Some victims of domestic violence become homeless because they have been evicted from their housing. The “zero tolerance for crimes” policy that many landlords hold allows landlords to evict tenants when violence has occurred in the home, regardless of if the tenant was the perpetrator or the victim of the violence (American Civil Liberties 90). Society’s treatment of domestic violence victims is clearly a substantial cause of homelessness, especially female homelessness.

The National Coalition of the Homeless also points to how society’s lack of support for the mentally ill leads to homelessness. Most mentally ill homeless people do not need to be institutionalized. They could live in the community if they were provided supportive housing options. “However, many mentally ill homeless people are unable to obtain access to supportive housing and/or other treatment services” (National Coalition 72). Without the support they need, many mentally ill members of our society end up on the streets.

There is a similar truth for homeless veterans, they lack the support of our government. The Coalition for the Homeless says that “The VA’s homeless programs assist only 40,000 veterans each year, less than 10 percent of the estimated number of veterans who experience homelessness annually” (98). Many veterans also experience homelessness due to their struggle with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and the common substance abuse that accompanies PTSD. Veterans, like other mentally ill members of our society, often do not receive the services they need to keep them off the streets. Data shows that approximately 50,000 veterans experienced homelessness during at least one night of January 2014 (Veterans 1). Our lack of support for those who have served our country is then definitely a major cause of homelessness.

Scholars thus present two theories about homelessness— that homelessness is caused by personal flaws and personal poor choices, and that homelessness is caused by structural factors. Scholars generally present one of the theories without considering the other— Shaw fails to consider structural causes in her writing and Kerr fails to consider individual causes in his— yet in reality the theories intertwine. For example, there are homeless people on the street whose homelessness have been caused by both the fact that they are an alcoholics and by the fact that they are unable to find affordable housing. The National Coalition for the Homeless states “while rates of alcohol and drug abuse are disproportionately high among the homeless population, the increase in homelessness over the past two decades cannot be explained by addiction alone” (72). The National Coalition for the Homeless, by contrast, claims that the rapid decrease of low-income housing, starting in the 1980s, is a better explanation of the increase of homelessness. Addiction does increase one’s likelihood of becoming homeless and it may make it difficult for one to find housing once they are on the streets, but addiction is just one factor in the web of complexities of homelessness (National Coalition 73).

Theological Background

Through the Labre Project, an organization I have had the privilege to be the president of this past year, I have spent my Friday nights giving food, clothing, and most importantly, friendship to the homeless in downtown Cleveland. At least in part, my involvement in Labre stems from my Catholic faith. I believe that I am called to help bring God's kingdom on Earth, and one way to do this is to bridge divisions in society. The way Jesus loved the marginalized around him of his time—the prostitutes, the tax-collectors, and the sinners—inspires me to love the marginalized around me.

Regardless of why one is homeless, Catholic faith teaches us to respond in a particular way. The Catholic Church's response to poverty and injustice is formally known as Catholic Social Teaching. While the Catholic Church has a long history of caring about the poor and taking part in charity, Catholic Social Teaching became an official doctrine in the Church in 1891, with Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. Several Papal encyclicals, as well as writings from Bishops, have spoken of social justice since then, expanding on Catholic Social Teaching. The Second Vatican Council and the Latin American Bishop's Conference at Medellín, as well as the Catholic Worker movement, have also added to the Church's understanding of how Catholics should respond to the injustice that exists in the world (History 1).

Catholic Social Teaching shows us how to respond to the fact that there are people living on the streets:

Catholic Social Teaching is based on the belief that God has a plan for creation, a plan to build his kingdom of peace, love and justice...Our part in this plan isn't just limited to things 'spiritual', or things we might do on Sundays, but that it involves every aspect of our lives, from the things we pray about, to how we live as a responsible global citizens (About CST, 1).

It tells us that we have a role in bringing the kingdom of heaven on Earth, and to do so, we must fight for peace, love, and justice in our lives and the society we live in. There are seven principles of Catholic Social Teaching that show us how to do this (About CST, 1). Respect for the human person, work for the common good/ solidarity, and preferential option for the poor and vulnerable are three principles that relate to how we should treat the homeless.

The principle of respect for the human person is found in the papal encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, written by John Paul II, which claims that at the center of Catholic Social Teaching is “a correct view of the human person and of his unique value, inasmuch as ‘man ... is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself.’ God has imprinted his own image and likeness on man (cf. Gen 1:26), conferring upon him an incomparable dignity” (11). Since humans were made in the image of God, all people have an inherent dignity and “there is nothing a person can do or undergo that leads to the forfeiture of this lofty status” (Massaro 81). Therefore, whether someone is homeless due to an addiction or due to an inability to find affordable housing, we are to treat the individual with dignity. The way we treat the homeless on the streets reflects how we treat God as they are God’s children.

A Catholic faith also tells us that we must respond to the reality that people are living on the streets. We must act out of charity as well as out of justice for these individuals as we fight for the common good. We are not to just act out of charity, for charity keeps the fate of the homeless in the hands of the wealthy. We must work to end the structures that cause homelessness so that no one is undignified and dependent on another’s charity for their survival. All acts of charity should be combined with an act that shows commitment to justice (Massaro 12). We are required to befriend these individuals as we work to lessen the divides that occur in society. *Economic Justice for All*, a pastoral letter written by U.S. Catholic Bishops in 1986, claims that “the extent of [the poor’s] suffering is a measure of how far we are from being a true community of persons” (88). As we are required to live in community

with all of God's creation, we are also required to fight along with the homeless as we work to change the systems that put them on the streets.

We are obligated to work for change in the system because "there are certain things that that all children of God deserve, and when vast inequalities prevent people from attaining what they need to preserve their lives and develop their potential, people of faith must speak out against these injustice" (Massaro 82). The principle of the common good teaches us that we must work to create the social conditions that allow humans, all humans, to flourish. In doing so, we are to live in solidarity with those who live in conditions that do not allow them to flourish. In *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, Pope John Paul II writes that solidarity "is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good. That is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all" (38).

People of faith are required to speak out against the fact that people go without the basic need of housing. Speaking out against injustice should be one of the main priorities of a Catholic. It is the Catholic's duty to echo God's love and stand with the poor and oppressed. As *Economic Justice for All* claims, "the obligation to provide justice for all means that the poor have the single most urgent...claim on the conscience" of humanity (86). As the poor must have an urgent claim on our conscience, we must have a preferential option for the poor, always aware of how our actions affect them, making sure to put their needs first in society.

Beyond what can be drawn from papal encyclicals and writings of Bishops, there is a movement within the Catholic Church, known as Liberation Theology, which also speaks to how we should respond to the poor and to the homeless. Liberation theology is a theology that developed within the Catholic Church in Latin America in the 1960s, influenced by the Second Vatican Council and the Latin American Bishops Conference at Medellín. It also emphasizes the preferential option for the poor. Gustavo Gutierrez, a Dominican priest from Peru, was a main voice of Liberation Theology. He argued that in the decisions we make and

the causes we support, we must reflect a preferential option for the poor, an understanding that we must put the needs of the poor first (Gutierrez 192). Gutierrez wrote, “God loves all people, but his first love is the forgotten and oppressed, the poor” (Gutiérrez 192).

Liberation Theology focuses on the liberation of the poor from oppression. It is a theology of life as it is a theology that realizes that God does not will the suffering of his people. God does not will people to be living in desperate, oppressed situations on this Earth. It brings about a change away from the belief that we should just simply be patient and obedient waiting for the next life and instead calls us to work actively for justice and liberation in this life. As we must actively work for justice, prayer is not enough, for “we distort the Gospel... when we want to separate prayer from commitment” (Gutierrez 106).

Liberation theology claims that there is something sacred about the stories of the poor— which is one reason why narratives of the homeless will be included in this project. Liberation Theology claims that:

The poor are especially privileged as storytellers of God...and if marginalized people are effective storytellers for God, then perhaps the interviews with homeless people described in later chapters are a kind of holy conversation (Nixon 14).

Narrative is one of the most holy ways to get to God. The narratives of the homeless are stories of weakness and despair, but they are also stories of strength and life (Nixon 50). It is in these stories of pain and strength that we can find the beauty of God.

Adrian, a homeless man I interviewed, shared his own thoughts on the fact that narratives would be included in this project. As we sat together on a park bench, birds flying overhead, he said:

It is important that you share these interviews. It is like the birds. The person who hears or reads this can't see the birds. That is the unseen. Meaning people can describe things to you, describe their life, whether helpful or harmful, and that will

only be a piece. What I like is to experience the journey, the adventure, of all the things that goes with surviving. If it wasn't for a lot of combinations of things, particularly, the volunteers, and interviews like this, I wouldn't be surviving. Because this [project] is needed in every state. Not only in America but all over. Instead of promoting things like tennis shoes and beer, this is more important. And this is why I like people like you. Thank you.

Adrian:

“Homelessness is a design, and it’s designed from the pressures of life.”

Sarah Kerr Shaw claims that there are five archetypes of how the housed treat the unhoused: “the Do-gooder, the Indifferent, the Hostile, the Politician and the Friend” (53). The Do-gooder is the person who has the intention of helping, but only does so when it is convenient to them, which is rather sporadically (Shaw 53). Often the Do-gooder helps the homeless solely out of charity, with a lack of justice, in a way that keeps the homeless dependent on them. The Indifferent are those who ignore the homeless, pass them by the street, pretending they are not there. The Hostile resent the homeless and are often violent toward them (Shaw 54). The Politician is the person who is “characterized by the desire for statures and notoriety, and their plans to end homelessness are the vehicle for them to gain both” (Shaw 54). The most positive archetype is the Friend. The Friend is the person who treats the homeless with humanity. The Friend genuinely wants to help the homeless, not only materially, but also emotionally. Most importantly, the Friend “does not see homeless people; he or she simply sees people” (Shaw 55).

Adrian is a forty year old, male African American, who has been homeless since the 1990s. He is a man full of life. Whenever students see him on Labre, he greets us with hugs

and is ready to share with us his next free-style rap. Claiming that my writing inspires him, he makes sure to have me write something for him at every visit, and then turns my work into a larger poem to give me. He is an artist who is free-spirited. At times he enjoys dancing for us, and his enthusiasm for life explodes in his dance moves. His words are so inspiring that something he said to me my sophomore year still remains quoted in my bedroom: "If you don't give somebody the opportunity of hope, then they don't know it exists." With those words, Adrian has moved me to give the homeless an opportunity for hope.

When I asked Adrian if there was anything good about being homeless, this is how he responded:

Volunteers. Volunteers are people who care enough to do something for someone, not because they are homeless, but because they care about the person. I am not saying anything material, to be treated like a human being is valuable... Being homeless is like being born again. Or a new day. Or a picture of the prettiest man or woman you have ever seen. It is something, that won't always be explained, because it takes time to marinate. It takes time for the eye to catch up with the brain. It is like a resurrection. It is like being at your lowest point and knowing that you can, if you plan, to get out, you can get out. This not like the material people. The people to busy playing with their little toys. They are boastful people and they irritate me because they are not for the people (Adrian).

Adrian recognizes homelessness to be both like a crucifixion, and like a resurrection. When you are at the lowest point of your life, you are given a chance, you are forced to reevaluate your life. From this opportunity to reevaluate your life, you have a chance to be born again. To start over. This does not mean homelessness is not full of pain and suffering, it is your lowest point. To turn the crucifixion into a resurrection, takes strength, takes courage, takes perseverance. You must marinate in your homelessness, to begin to understand it. It takes

time to create the new day. When the homeless fight their crucifixion, so that they may be resurrected, God is present.

It may be easy to consider Adrian to be worthless since he is homeless. It could be easy to be indifferent or hostile to him due to stereotypes we have about the homeless. To be anything other than Adrian's friend, however, is to not affirm God's creation. As David Nixon said, "a Christian commitment to equality derives from God's affirmation of each human being as of infinite and therefore equal worth, irrespective of differences of color, gender, social class, or race" (Nixon 62). Affirmation of God's creation means that we must move past the stereotypes and negative associations we have of the homeless. To look down at a homeless person and to think they are no good, scum, worthless, etc, is to look at God and say that God made junk. To say that a person deserves to be living on the street is to say that God's creation is worthless and should be treated as so.

Once you get to know Adrian, it becomes impossible to view him as scum. Adrian is definitely a talented poet, whose words and insights inspire those who give him the time of day to listen. I still remember a conversation I once had with Adrian about the portrayal of woman in society. He made me rethink how I viewed myself as a female. I began to have more respect for my body simply from a homeless man's words. We must remember that God's creation, God's people, are made of infinite worth. To not remember this could mean to miss out on the gifts others have for us. To not remember this could mean to deprive Adrian of what he claims is one of the most valuable gifts— to be treated like a human being.

Adrian has found himself affected by the institutional structures of society. Daniel R. Kerr sees homelessness as “a set of institutionalized relationships that benefit some at the expense of others” (3). Part of this institutionalization of homelessness is the transformation of working-class neighborhoods. In an attempt to make downtown Cleveland a “playground for the rich...The big boys downtown are building on...community land...they have put out these brand-new homes into the poor community...But if you look at the average person in the community, they are barely making \$10,000 a year” (Kerr 4-5). Where the poor used to live in Cleveland now exists upscale enclaves, the Cleveland Clinic, Mt. Sinai, and University Hospitals (Kerr 4-5).

The National Coalition of the Homeless also points to the lack of affordable housing as a cause of national homelessness. There is a lack of affordable housing because nationally “between 1973 and 1993, 2.2 million low-rent units disappeared from the market. These units were either abandoned, converted into condominiums or expensive apartments, or became unaffordable because of cost increases” (National Coalition 68). The gap between the number of affordable housing units and the number of people who need it has created a housing crisis. “Between 1970 and 1995, the gap between the number of low-income renters and the amount of affordable housing units skyrocketed from a nonexistent gap to a shortage of 4.4 million affordable housing units” on a national scale (National Coalition 69).

What are the events that you consider to have led to your states of homelessness?

Capitalism. We would have to do a whole seminar or book on capitalism. It is mostly, we have a lot of buildings in the city and it is ran very systematically. So what brings me to the questions and the answer is, the more questions you ask me, the more answers you are going to have. So I would suggest that from not building a program

that is designed for the economic stability of people in the community, which we are still people, regardless of our financial differences. So I would say homelessness is a design, and it's designed from the pressures of life. Those things are psychological and found in everyone's family, and in society, in one form or another. I am just a product of my heritage (Adrian).

Adrian speaks of how structural injustice, such as the transformation of poor neighborhoods, has an impact on his homelessness. The Catholic Church believes that Christians must respond to the structural injustices Adrian speaks of. The Catholic Church teaches that both charity and justice are necessary; not only can we help with the immediate needs of people, we must also work to change the structural injustices that put them in need. Charity though keeps the fate of the homeless in the hands of the wealthy. We must work to end the structures that cause homelessness so that no one is undignified and dependent on another's charity for their survival. All acts of charity should be combined with an act that shows commitment to justice (Massaro 12).

Charity alone will never fix the problem; it is nothing but a Band-Aid. There is nothing wrong with feeding something you find hungry on the streets. That person you are feeding is in need of immediate help— help them. There is nothing wrong with the fact that I, through the Labre Project, feed Adrian on Friday nights. He is hungry, it is important to respond. What is important though is that I make sure to not look down on him while I do so. The fact that I have the means to feed him does not make myself above him. The man has just as many gifts to offer me as I do to offer him. I must, however, also become more active in fighting against the systematic problems Adrian speaks of. In order to keep ourselves from focusing solely on charity, we must recognize that “true compassion is more than flinging a

coin to a beggar; it understands that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring” (Massaro 12).

We are all equal and made with the same dignity. No one should have to rely on someone else, someone “above” them to feed them. So while we feed them, we should come to their level, and help them move up.

Adrian has had a negative experience with temporary agencies. Daniel Kerr explains how employers and day-labor agencies benefit from their relationships with each other, at the expense of the worker. He claims that the rise of the homeless shelter systems in Cleveland goes hand in hand with the rise of Cleveland’s day-labor industry. Temporary labor keeps people homeless, for people are unable to afford housing with its wages (Kerr 7). Temporary labor agencies profit off of the homeless, for:

It is so easy to hire temporary labor. These employers don’t have to pay benefits.

They are getting cheap labor. They don’t have to worry about hiring anybody. They can just get rid of whoever they want to. It makes it so easy for them to exploit people and the law (Kerr 7-8).

One cause of the complexity of homelessness, then, is the way in which the homeless are often exploited by day labor agencies.

The National Coalition for the Homeless also claims that work is no escape from poverty, nor from homelessness. One urban study states “that 15% of persons in homeless situations are employed” (National Coalition 66). Due to inflation, the minimum wage today is not worth what it used to be; in 2004 it was worth 26% less than it was in 1979 (National Coalition 65). The reality of inflation plays into homelessness as “declining wages...have

put housing out of reach for many workers: in every state, more than the minimum wage is required to afford a one- or two-bedroom apartment” (National Coalition 65).

Have you tried to get more education than the level you have?

I am trying to perform [as a rapper] so that I can make enough money to go back to college....but it is more or less the wages. Minimum wage has always been a problem in society. Society likes to stray away from that issue. So it doesn't matter what president we have. The basic thing is there is problem with wage (Adrian).

Have you tried to find housing since you became homeless?

Yes. Everyone's situation is different. My situation stems from the amount of money that the government claims I owe them. It doesn't say anywhere in the scriptures where I owe anyone money because I have a child. And that keeps coming up. And that being the issue for the government since they want to control everything, that hurts my income, to satisfy their greed. The child is grown and in college that they are talking about. No contact with the child. I owe the government \$30,000 for back child support. When you are poor person, and the government says you owe them \$30,000, what is a person to do when they work in temporary services? When the minimum wage won't even feed their substance abuse, let alone their housing? When they say you have to pay child support, it is because they child in question is a victim. What is the child a victim of? They say I abandoned my child, or my children. Abandonment in today's era means a derelict. What do you think homeless people are called? A derelict. So you can see the connection. My child was never abandoned. Then they make it up in the book of law that I have to owe them (Adrian).

Have you been employed while being homeless?

“Yes, it is amazing that you ask that” (Adrian).

During times you have not been employed did you try and find work?

“Yes, and I have had help. It is not the person or the people, it is politics. Meaning we have to lobby in order to get the government to fund certain programs” (Adrian).

Working with Adrian and other homeless people has caused me to question whether my lifestyle has contributed to the fact that there are people sleeping without a home tonight. People who will likely go to bed hungry, cold, and scared. I often find myself feeling I am entitled to the things I have. I often feel entitled to my education, to the roof over my head, to my healthcare, etc. I, and my family, have worked hard for these things, so they are mine. Yet, Adrian wants an education and is working hard for it. I can see no good reason why I should be able to receive one when he cannot. Often we forget that the social class we were born into greatly affects the life we live today. I could have been born poor. And it's easy to forget that the poor work hard too.

I must reflect on the fact that my Church says that “private property does not constitute for anyone an absolute and unconditional right. No one is justified in keeping for his [or her] exclusive use what he [or she] does not need, when others lack necessities,” even though this belief is in contradiction with the values of my country (Massaro 92). One could claim that Adrian is not deserving of housing, since he has failed to pay his child support. We must recognize the truth is Adrian's words, however, that when one lives poor, it is hard to have the funds for everything. I sometimes wonder why I have been born into a situation where my housing and all my needs can fairly easily be paid for, when others struggle to get by.

My faith proposes that everything we own is not ours. This world is God's. We are entitled to nothing. What we do have was not given to us by merit alone. When I find a way to give myself away, I find myself. The things I have do not make me whole, love does.

People who face injustice and poverty are more likely to make poor choices due to the harsh circumstances they must fight to survive in. For example, those who are unable to find a job and are living in extreme poverty are more likely to turn to drug dealing and other criminal activity as a means of living and survival. They are also more likely to turn to alcohol and drugs as a means to cope with their difficulties. As the National Council on Drug Abuse argues:

A person in an impoverished situation may abuse drugs or alcohol as a way to cope with the dangerous environment she lives in, a way to deal with her financial stresses or a way to cope with physical or emotional abuse. Many times, drugs and alcohol are easily accessible in impoverished neighborhoods where some people actually sell drugs in hopes of overcoming poverty (1).

The poor do not only make bad decisions in order to survive and to cope with their situation, studies have shown that the “stress of worrying about finances can impair cognitive functions in a meaningful way,” also making it hard for the poor to make smart decisions (Thompson 1). Furthermore, those who are homeless have often unjustly experienced harsher punishment for their bad choices than the privileged of society. For example, the poor are more likely to be targeted and arrested for drug use. It is also more difficult for the poor to recover from drug and alcohol addiction as they do not have the resources to afford rehab as the wealthy do (National Council on Drug Abuse 2).

You may see an alcoholic homeless person on the street because they made a bad choice, becoming dependent on alcohol. Importantly though, they may have turned to alcohol because they were born into a difficult situation, such as poverty, that they could not control. In 2004, 25% of homeless people had been physically or sexually abused, 27% were in foster care as children, and 21% were homeless as children (National Coalition 69). They may also be unable to find affordable housing due to urban development, a situation that causes them to delve deeper into their alcoholism. Their increased dependency on alcohol may keep them from being able to qualify for any form of job that could pay for a home in Cleveland. Therefore, homelessness is both caused by injustice and inequality in our society as well as by personal choices, and most often the societal and individual causes combine with each other.

In what kind of family did you grow up? What was your family like?

“Short story. I grew up as a foster child. As a child, who I thought was my father and my mother were actually volunteers and social workers in a system called foster care. So at the age of three years old until 18 I was in that situation” (Adrian).

With the families you stayed with, how were you treated by those families?

When you go through something, it is always funny after. So not saying any terrible stories but as I reflect on emotions, the hardest thing was the separation of my family. Because after the age of three I never saw my family again. And being away from people you know, or know of, and not being able to be around them is like a false sense of security. And that’s what I lived through. A false sense of security (Adrian).

Do you have a history of mental, physical, or emotional illness?

"Yes, all three" (Adrian).

Do you have any history of substance abuse?

Yes I have. And substance abuse is a community situation. The reason why I blame the community, and not myself. When you look at health issues the homeless are always affected by it. So maybe if we gave them a program that gave them light, a building they can come in without being harassed, with some loving people. We all have things to do, I have things to do. But what we are doing, me and you, it's called finding time out to see where is the issue...in a community, trauma is a trigger to substance abuse. Violence is a trigger. So it is not a substance abuse. It is a domestic abuse. Excuse me, I am crying already. It is the views in the home, the broken home, my time in foster care (Adrian).

Do you think homelessness is caused by individual fault, society's injustices, or a combination of the two?

All of that. Because we are not perfect. This group of people is not perfect. And society is not perfect. People with money think they are privileged. People without money think they are privileged. Everybody is privileged. So who is being thankful? Some people like to say I give to the homeless people. But then they break them down, talk about them, degrade them. Or they do it in front of other people just to make themselves look good (Adrian).

The first principle of Catholic Social Teaching claims that all people are made in God's image and therefore all people are to be treated with dignity. No matter what Adrian has done, nothing can lead "to the forfeiture of this lofty status" of being made in the image of God (Massaro 81). Even though Adrian finds himself addicted to drugs, we must always treat Adrian with dignity. Due to human dignity, love of God is inherently connected with

love of neighbor. How we chose to treat Adrian is how we are treating God, since humans are made in God's image. God can be found in Adrian and all of our homeless brothers and sisters. How have I, how have you, been treating God?

Just because someone is homeless, or they are uneducated, they abuse substances, etc, does not mean that they do not have something to offer to the world. If we take the time to look, we can see that their dignified souls are beautiful. Often they even have something to teach us. Many of the poor have a grand faith that we all can learn from. You can see it in their eyes. In their hope. In their words. Some of the most powerful moments for me occur when on Labre, the homeless gather us all to pray, to thank the Lord for the food we have brought them, and to trust that God will take care of them. To give thanks to Lord for the simple fact that they are breathing. There is something holy about sharing the air with the homeless.

Tom:

“They think I must be able to handle the pain.”

Despite the fact that the number of people experiencing poverty, hunger, and homelessness in our society is growing, the funds needed to address these problems are decreasing (National Student Campaign 23). “From 2002 to 2003, the number of people living in poverty in the United States increased by 1.3 million to 35.9 million” (National Student Campaign 22). 900 food and shelter programs have claimed that the governmental cuts to social programs make it impossible to deal with the reality of poverty they deal with.

A decline in governmental support keeps shelters from being able to properly assist the homeless. A decline in government support also helps cause homelessness itself. The National Coalition for the Homeless claims that:

the declining value and availability of public assistance is another source of increasing poverty and homelessness...as a result of loss of benefits, low wages, and unstable employment, many families...struggle to get medical care, food, and housing (66-67).

Tom is a 52 year old male Caucasian who has been homeless for the past 3 years. Tom is a comical man who loves to joke around with the students whenever we visit him. Tom’s friendliness and loving nature has allowed him to form extremely close relationships with many Labre participants. Through such relationships we have taken Tom out to dinner and have even gone bowling with him a few times. The love in these relationships is clear,

the excitement shown each Friday when Tom gets to see some of his favorite people in the world is expressed through tightly embracing hugs. For many, Tom has become a father-like figure. He calls me on Thanksgiving, on Christmas. He is like part of my family, someone I want to share the holiday cheer with. He has even taken me to meet his mother and brother.

When I asked Tom what the events were that led to his state of homelessness, he said: “Being laid off in Florida and being unable to get on social security for disability here” (Tom).

When asked if there were any personal factors that made it difficult for him to find a job that pays enough for a home or apartment, he said:

Physical disabilities. COPD [Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease] and degenerative arthritis of the spine. I applied for disability for arthritis and I was denied. I think it’s because they think I am too young. They think I must be able to handle the pain. I need to apply for COPD and I know lawyers can help with this stuff but it is hard to get in contact with lawyers when you do not have an address (Tom).

Tom’s COPD is a real problem. I remember once walking up a hill with him and the difficulty he went through in his attempt to make the climb. I could have easily sprinted up that hill in a matter of seconds. It took Tom a good ten minutes to walk up, wheezing along the way.

Due to our inherent human dignity, there are certain things that all people are entitled to. There are certain things that Tom is entitled, and a place to call home is one of them. Being a Christian is about much more than just going to Church, it is also about looking after God’s children. When people are living on the streets, going to Church isn’t enough. We must live out the Christian belief of equal dignity, which means we must stand against “the

blatant perennial differences of wealth and privilege that divide people into distinct social classes” (Masarro 82). We must not only stand against the fact that there are some people living under bridges and others in mansions, but we must also stand against all of the social structures that lead people to the streets. This means that we must fight for Tom. We must fight for his right to be supported in his disability. We must fight for equal opportunities, which means we must fight for Tom’s access to a lawyer.

The fact that there are homeless veterans in our country is a huge scandal. People who have served our country, people like Tom, should never be living on the streets. Yet, there is not nearly enough veteran’s assistance to insure that everyone that has served our country has a roof over their heads. The reality is that “VA benefits and other public benefits are not adequate enough to allow most veterans— particularly in urban areas...— to afford rental housing” (Coalition for the Homeless 98). With the lack of support, 2% of all living American veterans experience homelessness in the course of a year (Coalition for the Homeless 97). 10% of all the homeless are veterans (National Coalition 69).

Furthermore, in general, the demand for housing assistance by far exceeds the supply. Due to the limited amount of housing assistance, “most poor families and individuals seeking housing assistance are placed on long waiting lists” (National Coalition 71). The time spent on waiting lists has grown and grown over the years as homelessness has become a bigger problem and housing assistance has not increased. NEOCH reports that there are 5,000 people on the Cleveland Metropolitan Housing Authority’s waiting list (Overview of Homelessness, 1).

What did you think of the schools you went to in grade school and high school?

"Well, I was a 10th grade dropout. My parents were separated and I knew neither of them could afford to send me to college, so I took the other route. I dropped out of high school and went into the army" (Tom).

What is your highest level of education?

"12th grade diploma. I got my GED certificate in late 80s. Went back to high school in 2000 and graduated in 2002" (Tom).

Have you wanted to receive more education?

"Sure. Education is always good" (Tom).

What have been your obstacles in doing so?

"Finding a school that would want me and a professor that would want to teach me. I would also need financial aid. I could never afford it" (Tom).

Have you tried to find housing since you became homeless?

"Yes, I have" (Tom).

What obstacles have you run into?

"The waiting period...I am still waiting" (Tom).

Another principle of Catholic Social Teaching is that of solidarity. Solidarity teaches us to move away from individualism and to realize that all people are interdependent. It teaches me that my life is connected to the life of Tom's and it asks me to work for his well-being. Solidarity asks us to put the common good above personal goals. Even more than that, however, is that it asks to move towards intimacy with all of God's people, including those living on the streets. God made us to be social beings and in doing so God asks us to share ourselves with others and to let them share themselves with us. We are not to just walk past

the homeless man or woman on the street. We are asked to engage in friendship with people like Tom.

This intimacy though is not just an obligation, it is a joy that enhances our life. As Thomas Masarro has accurately noted, “to employ the term solidarity entails recognizing human interdependence not only as a necessary *fact* but also as a positive *value* in our lives” (84). Solidarity allows us to move outside of ourselves and to have the opportunity to see God in those around us. There is something purely holy in sharing ourselves with others and often something divine in sharing with those whose voice is often ignored by society. The homeless are poor in the eyes of men and women, but they are rich in the eyes of God.

The relationship I have created with Tom has become a very important part of my life. It does not at all feel like an obligation. Some people may believe that I am helping out Tom through Labre, but the amount of love the man has showed me the past couple years often makes me feel as if he is the one helping me. I still remember the heart-warming text I woke up to from him on my 21st birthday. Never had I thought that the first person to wish me a happy birthday would be a homeless person.

Eric:

“I am homeless. But I am not without shelter.”

A formerly homeless man named Leaney reflected on homelessness for the Midland news. One of the things that impressed him about the homeless people he lived with was their resourcefulness. While we often picture the homeless to be uneducated and lazy, “many of them are ‘highly inventive’ and ‘high intelligent people,’ he said” (Homeless Not Lacking 1). Leaney remembers a “jerry-rigged heater that one man created for himself, a small metal stove that pumped hot water through a series of pipes to heat the man’s temporary shelter. Much of the equipment for it had been scavenged” (Homeless Not Lacking, 1).

Eric is a homeless man who breaks the stereotype of homeless people having no talents to offer the world. While Eric is technically homeless, he has quite literally built a home for himself. Back in the woods, Eric has created a multi-room cabin. The last time I was in this cabin, it was a freezing 15 degrees outside. The fireplace created by Eric, as well as the insulation of his cabin, made Eric’s shelter 69 degrees. Eric’s innovation allows him to survive Cleveland’s winters as he lives in a shelter warmer than the temperature in which I keep my apartment.

Eric is 56 year old Caucasian man who has been homeless for the past twenty years. He is extremely inventive and keeps himself busy. Every time I visit him, he is building

something new. His love for animals caused him to build extravagant beds for his once pet cats. Eric is extremely friendly and has much to share with us each time we visit on Labre.

When I asked Eric if he has lived on the streets or used shelters while being homeless, he answered:

“From 98 to now I have been on the streets. I always make mine, you see that?”

(Eric).

When I asked Eric if he has built places besides the one he currently lives in, he responded:

“Yeah. I have had places all over the place. I am homeless. But I am not without shelter. I am smarter than that” (Eric).

When I questioned how he learned to build his shelters, Eric claimed:

“Oh on my own, I was creative” (Eric).

When asked what his employment history was like before he became homeless, he said:

I never worked for nobody, I was always self-employed. I bought a shop, built a shop, started my own shop. And twenty years later I sold out. I never really worked for nobody but me. I was actually independent all my life. Well I didn't work for nobody before I got divorced (Eric).

Every time I visit Eric I am at awe with the many things he has built. It is so easy to walk past a homeless man and judge them. To think, why don't you get a job? To think why don't you get an education? To think, why don't you get your life together? Instead of judging, maybe we should stop and stare in awe at the ways in which the poor find a way to survive. I have most certainly been in awe in the way in which Eric has found a way to

survive. Eric may be homeless, but he is not just surviving. He has created quite the life for himself, a multi-room cabin, outdoor furniture, and innovative beds for his pets.

Within our judging, have we ever thought that maybe they are unable to get a job? Have we ever thought that maybe they have not had the same access to education as you have?

We might think, why don't you stop drinking? How many people do we know who drink, that are not homeless? Do we have the same thoughts? There are millions of people who drink in this world in order to drink away their problems. *Sometimes I wonder if I could live homeless without wanting to drink away the pain.*

Our Christian faith tells us not to judge, but simply to love. Everyone has a story. Everyone has a reason why they are in the situation they are in right now. I can't imagine what it would be like living homeless. Can you? I am almost certain I would not be surviving in the innovative way Eric is.

Since homelessness is caused by a variety of complex factors, it cannot be truly solved by simply giving someone a house. This is especially true when it is personal factors that are causing someone to be homeless. To support someone who is homeless due to substance abuse or mental illness means much more than to provide them with shelter.

Housing will not solve all of these people's problems. As important as housing is, "often these individuals will not be able to remain in the housing provided for them unless they also receive" the treatment they need (Harvard Mental Health Letter 83). Housing and treatment must come with each other. Housing will never work for someone with a history of mental illness or substance abuse if they do not have continue support with and treatment of their problems.

What are the events that you consider to have led to your state of homelessness?

“Alcoholism and a divorce, truthfully” (Eric).

Do you have any history of substance abuse?

"Alcoholic. Well I didn't start drinking until I got divorced. When I got divorced, I just gave up. Alcohol was it. And that didn't work" (Eric).

What do you think led to your substance abuse?

"I had a nervous breakdown. My life went from buying a Lincoln continental on a credit card to 'hey you got a dollar?'" (Eric).

Have you ever tried to get help with your alcoholism?

“Yes, Care Alliance. I could be a commercial for them. First I went to a center, I lasted 110 days. Yes, I did. 18 terrible months later I went to Y-Haven. That's been almost five years ago now” (Eric).

Were there any obstacles to getting help?

“Me. Me. I am the biggest obstacle. Jim Schlecht, all the Churches around here, they all know me, they all tried to do their best. They all bent over backwards but my alcoholism said screw them. I am smarter than them. Well, I ain't. But that was my choice, that was me” (Eric).

Have you tried to find, besides the beautiful things you have built, housing since you became homeless?

Oh sure, I was. Jim Schlect, Care Alliance took me to apartments, Riverside. He handed me the key, I took two steps in and turned around and gave him the key back, and said Jim, have every homeless bum up here you have ever seen. [Give it to them instead of me]. I walked away. I couldn't do it. I would have had every one of my

friends on the streets up there, believe me, if it was cold, you all come on up here. I would...I lived in an apartment. And I was making damn good money. My bills only took half of my pay check a month. Sometimes only one week covered my rent, my bills, my food. I had a bunch of money, I got nervous. So I quit (Eric).

Have any personal factors made it difficult for you to find a job?

“Me, no. I don’t want a full time job. I worked solid years. 15 something an hour. I just said screw it, I started getting nervous, I’m gonna start drinking again. I quit. If I want 50 bucks, I’ll go make my 50 bucks. I don’t have any problem with working for that” (Eric).

Eric does not consider social injustice to be a cause of his homelessness, he recognizes his own fault, his own drinking to be the cause. While generally speaking, social injustice plays a part in most homeless people's stories, the truth remains that "there are homeless individuals, [who are] the victims of personal problems", such as alcoholism. Eric may be homeless due to personal problems, yet, the Christian values of forgiveness and unconditional love teach us that no matter why a person is homeless, we are to love them. Even if someone’s homelessness is caused by their own fault, we are to treat them with dignity.

We have all made mistakes in life. None of us are perfect. Some of us have a safety barrier around us. If we mess up, someone else, possibly our family, will catch us and lift us up. Some of us don’t have that. For some, one mistake puts them on the street. A mistake does not define a person. Alcoholism does not define a person. We are much more than our shortcomings, and we must remember that. Even the alcoholic, even the ex-criminal, has something to offer the world.

Knowing Eric and his character, it would seem strange for me not to love him. His warm heart is deserving of love, despite any bad decisions he has made. Eric has certainly taught me a lot about being resourceful and about making the most out of what one has. He also has showed me how to be selfless and generous; Eric constantly allows other homeless people to live in his cabin with him.

We all have a story. We all make mistakes for a reason. I recognize that if I had been born into a different family, into a different situation, I may have ended up homeless.

1% of the U.S. population is homeless (Myths and Facts 1). Of that 1%, 6% choose to be homeless (Myths and Facts 2). Some of them literally chose to live homeless because they want to be in the open air, or they don't want to live in society, or they want to live with the least amount of material goods as possible. Other individuals chose to live homeless not because they have something against having a home, but because having a home causes something in their life. In this way, these people are not really choosing homelessness, but are "refusing the demands made upon them to maintain a house or apartment" (Myths and Facts 1).

How does it make you feel to be homeless?

I don't consider myself to be homeless. Never have. I am stepping out of society. That's it. I don't care. I ain't hurting nobody. The churches and all, John Carroll, everybody helps me. It ain't like I am homeless. I ain't living off the land. Plus, I love the critters more than I love people. I love my deer (Eric).

It is there anything good about being homeless, or living the way you live?

“I don’t have to deal with people. All my life I dealt with people” (Eric).

Our ideas of acceptable social behavior often cause us to look down on the homeless and the way in which they live. One may look at Eric and think that his homelessness is unacceptable. We may feel ourselves to be above. Maybe even closer to God, due to the way in which we live. The reality, though, is that God has identified with those on the margins, with those who are suffering. Robert Nikia writes:

On the cross, God entered into history to take on flesh to endure and partake of our suffering. This act of solidarity with those who suffer makes God accessible not because God is pristine, privileged, and healthy, but precisely because God identifies with the filthy, the vulnerable, and the afflicted. God is present in holiness as well as in holy messes (2).

To God, where we belong in society does not matter. Whether we live in a two-story home or in a cabin, we are God’s children. Whether we eat three course meals or out of a dumpster, we are beautiful in God’s eyes. There is no reason for us to feel better than those who live with less than we do. There is no reason for us to believe that we are more beautiful in God’s eyes, for:

God loves and accepts us regardless of our social stripes, sickness, and status... This God, no matter our condition, context, or consumptions chooses to make room to accept us all. With God’s indiscriminate love, we are not only accepted but we are transformed... God is with those for whom society has made no home; society may

push out [the homeless] but the Divine has made room for the discredited,
dehumanized, denied, and disenfranchised (Nikia 3).



Pam:

“I was not their first priority.”

In a study of homeless women at the Brooklyn Women’s Shelter in East New York, known as the Dwelling Place, it was found that the most important factor leading to the state of homelessness of these women was a loss of family and/or other relationships (Golden 20).

The Dwelling Place staff describes the situation of the women as follows:

The great majority had lived within society, to some extent at least, and became homeless only when their network of support was destroyed. Because most were products of a generation that socialized women to be dependent and not to work, the determining factor that broke up their lives and plunged them into homelessness was usually not economical but relational (Golden 20).

These women became homeless when they lost their source of dependency, usually through a loss of a husband, parent, or other relative (Golden 20).

In general, it is not uncommon for homeless people to feel abandoned and neglected by their family members. From my experience, I have noticed that it can be hard for them when they have family members with shelter who do not take them in off of the streets.

Pam is a 63 year old Caucasian woman who has been homeless off and on for the past 8 years. She is a soft spoken woman with a huge heart. Pam currently lives out of her van, and when a Labre participant noticed a cute stuffed animal in her passenger seat, Pam immediately gave it away to the student. The stuffed animal had emotional significance to

Pam, but she did not hesitate to give it away. Pam has been hurt in her past, speaking about such events brought tears to her eyes during the interview. Despite her hurt, Pam's heart continues to radiate with love.

When I asked Pam about the events that led to her state of homelessness, she replied as follows:

The income stopped. I fell behind in the mortgage. Then there was a foreclosure and eviction. I could have saved my home through equity, but they didn't tell me this back then, it's like they wanted me to be homeless. My husband passed away 18 years ago and he was the family's source of income. I married him straight out of high school, when I was 18. My husband worked, I didn't. For a little while, for three years, I got a check after my husband died for my youngest daughter. But that stopped when she was 16. When she was 18 she moved out and got a job, but she didn't want to help. The girls didn't want the home, so what was I to do? My homelessness was caused by the selfishness and greediness of my kids. My daughter, she would help strangers, but wouldn't help her own family. I got more help from strangers than I got from my own family. The girls now, two of them, they themselves have been close to homelessness. They wish they had kept the house now, because they would have always had a place to go. They both got divorced. I tell you, the one should have never divorced her husband because he would have always provided for her and given her a home to stay in (Pam).

When I asked Pam if she had been employed while being homeless, she replied as follows:

I worked for a factory but it was too strenuous. I am an official election worker. I work with these three other ladies. They also work as traffic sign holders. There is an opening, and they tell me to apply, but I know I can't do the job because of my arm. I

can't hold up a sign that long. It's hard to find work because there isn't much I can do...I have a lot in common with these three ladies. They are widowed, like me. Well one of them remarried. She didn't want to be homeless so she married a longtime friend (Pam).

In Pam we see a person who has been forgotten by them, and she has been left lonely with the death of her husband. She often goes hungry and shivers in the cold of her heatless car. In some ways we see a lady whose suffering is a crucifixion. The homeless are, in many ways, the crucified in our world. In fact, "in the light of faith, Christians see in [the homeless] the face of the Suffering Servant, Jesus Christ" (Boff and Boff 4). The homeless are the suffering, the lonely, the hungry. They are the people looked down upon by society, forgotten, and abused.

Within people like Pam and in their circumstance we can find the suffering of Jesus. Leonardo and Clodovis Boff claim that Jesus weeps at seeing his creation in such a circumstance and Jesus asks his people for a response; "the Crucified in these crucified persons weeps and cries out: "I was hungry...in prison...and naked" (Boff and Boff 4, Matt. 25:31-46). Solidarity calls us to act of love towards the Suffering Christ. God is found in these people— we must stand with them and against the poverty they face.

Under international law, all people have a right to housing, in conditions of privation, including widowhood. The right to housing is found in the United Nations' *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, which was written in 1948 (Heybach and Nix-Hodes 110-111).

All members of the UN “are bound to respect and observe the rights contained in the Universal Declaration [and] when the United States cuts housing subsidies to reduce corporate taxes...it violates these laws” (Heybach and Nix-Hodes 110-111). The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* claims that all people have the right to a standard of living that allows him to take care of himself [or herself] and his [or her] family through food, clothing, housing, healthcare, and necessary social services. This right includes “the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, and other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his [or her] control”. One key element to this right of housing is that it must be affordable, housing costs cannot be so high that one is unable to pay for other basic needs (Heybach and Nix-Hodes 113).

Have you tried to find housing since you became homeless?

I had housing through Eden. But when Eden quit paying, I had to leave. Eden will only help you so long, after a year you are expected to have saved up for you to be able to pay on your own. I get a check every month from the VA. My husband was in the army and so they started giving me checks because he passed away and I had no source of income. It took a while for them to start getting me the check though. There was a war going on, a lot of people were dying, so they had to take care of the mothers and children. I was not their first priority. By the time I started getting the checks I had already lost the house. I get \$500 every month from the VA. It helps, it's something, but it is not enough for rent. You can find something where you pay \$500 a month for rent, but when all your money goes to rent, there is nothing left for utilities or food. I am starting, next year, to also get checks from Social Security. With both I should be able to get housing. They will help me now because I am older.

Apparently I have qualified for it for three years, and didn't know it. They don't tell you, you are just supposed to know (Pam).

In Pam's story, governmental institutions have not been very helpful in alleviating her pain. The way in which our government runs and the policies we have enacted are often not very human. To become more human, we as a people, must fight for governmental policies that help the most vulnerable of our society. As Cathy Molloy writes, "It is more human to want to alleviate the pain of others, it is more human to do something practical— to go there, to be with the people, to give money or goods or time" than to ignore the plight of the suffering (Molloy 128). When our government fails, we must also take it upon ourselves to help alleviate the pain of others.

When considering how we should treat Pam we should consider the story of the Good Samaritan. The person who acted most human, most Christian, and most neighbor-like in the story was the person who did not take "a detour in order to avoid seeing the wounded victim on the road, but instead [came] closer to examine the person and help" (Molloy 131). It was the person who remembered that each one of us is part of humankind, the person who could not look with indifference at the person in need. How many times have we passed a homeless person by on the street? Have we helped them? Befriended them? Or have we looked on them with indifference? Perhaps disgust? Maybe we have even avoided walking past them. What is interesting is that we did not only pass up an opportunity of helping someone in need, we passed up the opportunity to be "changed in a way that is radical and ongoing" (Molloy 132). By refusing to acknowledge someone on the street, possibly due to stereotypes we have about him or her, we missed out on forming a mutual relationship with a child of God. By reaching out to a homeless person, we not only help that person, but ourselves. The truth is, "in

authentic solidarity, the giver also receives” (Molloy 137). My friend literally received from Pam when she gave her the stuffed animal, but Labre participants also receive from Pam ever Friday through her radiating love.

Jim:

“I am not proud of myself. I have a very low self-esteem.”

30% of the homeless in the United States are chronic substance abusers. The most common substances that are abused are alcohol, cocaine, and heroin (Mahoney 75). It is clear that substance abuse finds relation with homelessness. What often is not clear, however, is which precipitates the other. As Diana Mahoney writes:

The co-occurrence of substance abuse and homelessness makes sense. The realities of homelessness impede consistent participation in substance abuse interventions and continued engagement in treatment strategies. Similarly, chronic substance abuse often limits social and familial ties, prevents gainful employment, and drains financial resources (Mahoney 75).

For some people, substance abuse plays a huge part in their becoming homeless. For other people, homelessness is what causes their substance abuse, as they attempt to cope with their homelessness. For many, it is a combination of the two. It is important to note though that not everyone who takes part in substance abuse becomes homeless (Mahoney 75). Since people can abuse substances and never become homeless, “it can only be said that drug and alcohol abuse is a major contributing factor toward an individual’s *vulnerability* to homelessness” (Mahoney 76).

Jim is a 50 some year old Caucasian, who has been homeless off and on for the last 14 years. He is a quiet man, yet a man that will easily share with you if you approach him. It is clear that Jim has been hurt and he is struggling. He recently got out of a long-term relationship, one which temporarily allowed him to be housed, and now finds himself back on the streets. Jim struggles with alcoholism but I have noticed during my Friday night visits with him that he is improving. He used to be intoxicated just about every time we visited, but now we sometimes find him sober. As Jim struggles to overcome his addiction, however, he has had several seizures and recently even had a stroke. Jim has a strong spiritual side to him. He at times struggles with his faith, but it is clear that he is holding on strong to God. God's love for him is something that keeps him going in life.

When I asked Jim what the events were that he considered to have led to his state of homelessness, he responded as follows:

Well, when I was in high school my parents moved up to Cleveland to take care of my grandma. Later, after high school I followed them but I was unable to find a job here. With no source of income, I ended up on the streets. I used to live in this homeless camp, and actually, I have moved around a bunch of different homeless camps. And I drank, a lot (Jim).

When I asked him if he had a history of drinking before he became homeless or if he start drinking in order to cope with his homelessness, he responded as follows:

When I was in high school, I lived with my brother. My brother had a lot of drugs and alcohol around so I was introduced to it. But I stayed in school. It wasn't until I became homeless that drinking became a problem. You're around other people that drink. And it's hard being homeless. You don't know how to deal with it. Other people look down on you. I found that I didn't care what other people thought of me when I drank, so I chose to drink. It was a choice (Jim).

When I asked Jim if he had ever tried to get help with his substance abuse, he replied as follows:

Yes, I have. Just a few weeks ago I took myself to the hospital, because I felt I was getting out of control. They put me in a nursing home and rehab. But I only stayed in rehab a week. They tell me to go to AA meetings. But I find that when I talk about my problem of drinking, and I hear other people talk about it, it just makes me want to drink. I would want to go straight to a bar after one of those meetings. I try and help myself by not wondering far from here. These guys help me out, we are all trying to stay sober. It's when I go walking on the streets that I end up drinking (Jim).

When I asked him if there were any obstacles to getting help, he responded as follows:

“Transportation. You have to find money for the buses. When you are homeless, it is hard to get to appointments on time” (Jim).

The homeless' strength as they live through their difficulties is magnificent. Jim's strength in his fight with alcoholism is inspiring to me. The homeless' faith, despite their difficulties, is often ever present, and frequently all they have. I remember clearly the time Jim spoke to me about God. He wanted to make sure I knew that God loved me. That God loves everyone. As Jim was making sure that I knew of God's love, he was holding on strong to God's love of him. You could see it in his eyes that it was this love that kept him going in life. His passion for God rang through, he was thankful that God was something he had in life.

The homeless are inspiring as they show you the God of life; “at the heart of a situation that excludes them and strips them of everything, and from which they seek to free themselves, the poor and oppressed believe in the God of life” (Gutierrez 106). Some of the

homeless tend to be more alive than anyone I have ever met before. They are likely so alive, because through their difficulties, they are just simply gracious to be alive.

The God of life says this: beauty can be found in both the good and the bad. Beauty can be found as we celebrate the fact that we are breathing. Beauty can be found as we find the strength to carry on one more homeless night. The God of life says that Jim is strong and beautiful. The God of life also says this: life is more than sleeping homeless. Life is more than being stereotyped. Life is more than being abused, neglected, and having unequal opportunities. Life is more than that, and the God of life asks us to fight so that everyone has more than that. The God of life asks us to support Jim so that he can have more than the life he currently has.

A commonly held myth is that if the homeless would just go get a job, they would no longer be homeless. Around 15% of the homeless are employed, though, disproving this myth (National Coalition 66). The reality of the matter, furthermore, is that it is extremely hard to get a job once you become homeless. It is not easy to just “go get a job”, for:

In order to get a job, people must be clean and they must wear clean clothing. Even at McDonald's and other fast-food restaurants employees are required to be clean...

Without access to toilets, showers and laundry facilities, how are people to keep themselves and their clothing clean? (Shanes 1).

This inability to stay clean, to have the right clothing, to look presentable, means that unemployment often leads to homelessness, but homelessness can also lead to unemployment.

Have you been employed while being homeless?

“I had a temporary job a while back. Besides that, just doing odd jobs for people”

(Jim).

Have you tried to find work?

“Yes, I have. But it’s hard, when you go to an interview and you look dirty. It’s hard to stay clean-shaven. To have the right clothes to impress people. When I was really bad with my drinking though I just didn’t care” (Jim).

How does it make you feel to be homeless?

“I am not proud of myself. I have a very low self-esteem.” (Jim).

Jim's low self-esteem stems from society's view of the homeless. When someone becomes homeless, they often find that they are "no longer are been treated like a human being but instead are been labelled and isolated, they are also given little respect as people believe them to be of lower status just because they don't have a home to go back to" (Catholic Social Teaching 1). When someone is constantly being looked down upon and stereotyped by those around them, it only makes sense that their self-esteem would plummet.

Society tells us that success comes from the material possessions we own and to live without one of the most important material possessions, a home, is to feel like a failure. The homeless suffer with the criticisms of those around them as well as the ways in which they criticize themselves for not meeting society's definition of success.

Jim is not proud of himself. He has a low self-esteem. Yet, Jim is human. Jim has dignity. And he have gifts to offer the world if we shall give them the opportunity. Gifts that maybe would be shared if employers did not judge him by his appearance.

If there was one thing you wanted the general public to understand about the homeless, what would it be?

Adrian:

“Poor people are not good people. Or bad people. Poor people, or homeless people, are people. Human beings. And that’s what human beings have to know about us” (Adrian).

Tom:

“That we are all not the same. Don’t prejudge us just because we look homeless without knowing our story” (Tom).

Eric:

I think the general public ought to know more about John Carroll, and about Care Alliance. I would want the homeless to know to never give up. I have never given up. I mean I slept in some shitty places and all that, but I never give up on myself or God. God never gave up on me. I thought he did, but he never did. Tomorrow is always better. Always better (Eric).

Pam:

“We aren’t all the same. Some homeless people do drugs and just sit around and do nothing. They are young and could do something. But I’m not like that” (Pam).

Jim:

“That we are not bad people. There are good guys out here. And we look after each other. When someone needs something, we share. I really hope that if other homeless guys read your project someday, what I have said will help them” (Jim).

Sarah and Greg:

“the fear...experienced was completely real.”

In the U.S., “about 600,000 people are homeless on any given night” and over a five year period, 2-3% of the U.S. population finds themselves to be homeless, that is, around 8 million people (Harvard Mental Health 80). Of these numbers, about one-third to one-fourth suffer from a serious mental illness, such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or severe depression (Harvard Mental Health 80). Statistics bear out that the mentally ill are vulnerable to homelessness. If they do not receive help, their mental illness often causes them to be “unable to negotiate the complex processes of finding housing and of protecting themselves from eviction” (Harvard Mental Health 79). Once homeless, the mentally ill generally avoid living in shelters and find themselves on the street (Harvard Mental Health 79). Crowded shelters are just not the best environment for the mentally ill: according to the Harvard Mental Health Letter “shelters are often filthy, dangerous, and crime-ridden. There is little privacy...Many of the mentally ill avoid shelters because they fear violence...or cannot tolerate the noise, crowds, and confusion” (Harvard Mental Health 81).

While the mentally ill are more likely to lose the housing they once had, they also have a much harder time having access to housing programs; “housing programs are complex, competitive, and difficult to access for people with mental illness” since neighbors and landlords simply do not want them (Harvard Mental Health 81). There are housing programs which are a good fit for the mentally ill, but resources are very limited (Harvard Mental Health 82).

Sarah and Greg are two homeless people I know who suffer from mental illness. They were not interviewed for this project for a few reasons, one of them being that I do not consider them to be in a psychological state where they could consent to an interview. Even though they were not formally interviewed, I want to share with you pieces of their story through conversations I have had with them. I find it important to include the mentally ill in this project, for the homeless would not be properly represented without some discussion of mental illness.

I remember when I got the call. It was March of 2014. I was out on Labre, visiting some homeless friends we meet every week near a Burger King. It was Tom on the line. He was shaken up; angry and terrified. Someone had set his tent on fire. He had lost everything. My heart broke. Tom had been through enough. When he called me to give me this news, I felt as if my dad had been calling me to tell me our house had burnt down.

We rushed immediately to go see Tom and be there for him in his time of distress. It was then that I learned that the same thing had happened to Sarah. Sarah, who lived down the road from Tom, also had her tent burned down. I was immediately worried. If Tom was struggling to deal with the loss of his possessions, I knew Sarah could not be coping well. We went to look for her, but she could not be found.

Sarah suffers from schizophrenia and was homeless for fourteen years. She is a Caucasian woman who is likely in her 50s. Honestly speaking, most students who come out on Labre have struggled to deal with Sarah. They say she is crazy. And yes, the truth is, she suffers deeply from mental illness. For some reason, I found a gift within myself to be able to connect with Sarah. In the end all she needed was someone to listen to her, someone to reassure her, and someone to not tell her she was crazy.

Sarah was paranoid and afraid. She constantly spoke to me about other homeless people that were stalking her. She spoke to me about people who lived across the lake who were performing cultic rituals, stealing and murdering her cats in order to do so. She spoke to me of her fear of the end of the world coming, and all of the events that would come with it.

Whether or not the stories Sarah told me were true, the fear she experienced was completely real. I cannot imagine living in the type of fear she did. The night Sarah's tent burned down, she had reason to be afraid. After this event, Sarah got worse. We found her the next Friday, and I will never forget the look of terror in Sarah's eyes. She had a million theories about who had burned down her tent. She claimed she no longer had anywhere to go. She had been homeless fourteen years, and felt that she had lived in just about every area of Cleveland at this point and did not know where she could move to be safer. When I asked Sarah why she didn't go to a shelter, anger came out of her being, it was clear that I should have known how frightening shelters can be, particularly for those suffering from paranoia.

Luckily, after fourteen years, Sarah was taken care of. She had become a priority and homeless advocates were able to fight for her to be able to get inside an apartment through housing assistance. To the best of my knowledge, Sarah still lives in this housing.

Sarah is a rejected person in society. Even some students who chose to reach out to the homeless through Labre found themselves struggling not to reject her. The Bible shows us that Jesus was not solely concerned about his relationship with the Father; he was also concerned about his relationship with those around him. Jesus reached out to the rejected of society.

Our faith tells us to help bring about God's kingdom on Earth. God's kingdom cannot occur when there are people being crucified with injustice and oppression. The kingdom of

God cannot occur when there are mentally ill people living on the street, isolated, rejected, not receiving help. If our purpose is to bring about the kingdom of God, we do so by showing God's unconditional love to our brothers and sisters. Sarah is the type of person we must show unconditional love to, and in moments of doing so, we are bringing God closer to this Earth.

One of the hardest things for the homeless who are mentally ill is their isolation. Once the mentally ill become homeless "their isolation becomes...serious, because lost connections are difficult to establish" (Harvard Mental Health 81). Social interaction is important for anyone, but it is especially important for the mentally ill. The mentally ill are stigmatized by our society, however, causing people to withdraw from them. When a person with mental illness becomes homeless, they deal not only with the stigmatization of mental illness, but also of homelessness, making it twice as likely for them to become isolated from society (Stobbe 1-2). People become isolated because of their mental illness, but their isolation also makes their mental illness worse. According to Stobbes, "when the person isolates more, they face more mental distress. With more mental distress, they want to isolate. This vicious cycle relegates many people with severe mental illness to a life of social segregation and isolation" (2).

As a society we need to become aware of the ways in which we are stigmatizing the mentally ill and causing them to become isolated. It is important to note that no one ever chooses mental illness; it is not a fault of their own.

I am not a psychologist so I cannot be certain, but I believe that Greg also suffers from schizophrenia. Greg is a Caucasian man who is around the age of 45. Strangely enough, he is

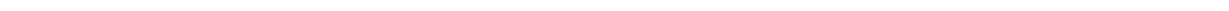
one of the homeless people that Sarah was paranoid about and believed was stalking her. With Sarah now inside, Greg has come to be the most challenging and most impactful person for me to visit on a Friday night. It is clear that he receives very little human interaction and he desperately needs someone to talk to. The moment we walk out of the Labre van, Greg begins telling us about the spirit that has been haunting him the past twenty years.

Greg has been homeless for the last twenty years, and he claims it was then that the spirit came into his life. He calls the spirit crazy and ignorant, and speaks of how unfair it is that the spirit will not leave him alone. Greg confided in us that the rest of his family is dead, and he blames their death on the spirit.

Greg is a graduate of American University in Washington D.C. He is a well-kept person who was once a well-to-do man. He used to own his own business. Greg believes that he could currently be a millionaire if it were not for the spirit that is attached to him. The spirit tells him that he should have no more life than to sit on a rock. That being anti-social is a good thing, that being homeless is the life he should have. Greg does not want this life, but for twenty years, he has been unable to rid himself of this spirit.

Pope Benedict XVI spoke of how our preferential option for the poor must specifically include support for mentally ill people like Sarah and Greg. At the 2006 World Day of the Sick, Pope Benedict stated, “every Christian, according to [their] specific duty and responsibility, is called to make [their] contribution so that the dignity of the [mentally ill] brothers and sisters may be recognized, respected and promoted.” Pope Benedict then called Catholics to work for efforts that will ensure that the mentally ill are given necessary treatment and support and that Catholics create a culture of acceptance for them (Lambert, 8).

More initiatives are needed to reach out to the homeless mentally ill. No one should be living on the streets for twenty years, with little human contact, suffering in the way Greg does.



John:

“Sometimes wisdom comes next to a heating grate.”

“I once ran across this man. Eleven fluent languages. College professional. And he was worse off than I was. He didn’t drink. He was not a drug addict. He just became homeless” (Eric).

A study in Cincinnati found that “60% of homeless men and 49% of homeless women are high school graduates; almost 5% of men and 4% of women have college degrees (Homeless Facts 2).

Often we believe that the homeless are far from you and I. It is true that many of them grew up poor, that many of them are uneducated. Yet, some of them are very educated. The truth is that anyone can become homeless. A life changing event could put you and I out on the street.

Divorce is one of those life-changing events that can easily lead to homelessness. “Divorce often leaves one of the spouses homeless. Most often it’s the father, but sometimes it’s the mother and children or everyone involved” (Factors Contributing, 1). With divorce, a couple’s finances immediately changes. They are no longer counting on a dual income to take care of finances (Study Shows Poverty, 1). Essentially, “ones financial footing [becomes] jeopardized” (Study Shows Poverty, 2).

I tried several times to interview John. When speaking to him, he seemed more than excited to do the interview. Yet, each time he did not show up. In the end, I decided maybe the interview wasn't meant to be. I was sitting in my car the other day, waiting for John to come, when a lady knocked at my window. The lady said, "Miss, I am sorry to bother you, but can you please help me so I can have somewhere to rest my head tonight?" When I asked her what it was she needed, she said it was \$10. "I must have ten dollars to stay at the apartment tonight." Generally speaking I do not give people money, I prefer to give them food or clothing. Yet, I realized that neither food nor clothing would help this woman in her predicament, and as she looked genuinely frightened about having to sleep outside, I gave her the ten bucks. She was a woman in her forties, yet, she walked away skipping, in complete joy. She raised her hand to the sky, as to thank God. Then she stopped, turned around to thank me, and told me "without this, I would have slept homeless tonight." Maybe I was never supposed to interview John, but I was supposed to be there waiting for him. It's spectacular how God works.

While I never had the chance to interview John, I want to share without you what I do know about him. John is a 50 some year old Caucasian man who breaks just about every stereotype of a homeless person. He has been homeless for the last few years. When I visit John on Friday nights, I honestly only understand about half of the conversation we have with him. He is one of the smartest people I have ever met. He speaks to us about the stock market, about the downfalls of religion, and about the injustice of the court system. John has told me that his homelessness was caused by a divorce. He claims that his ex-wife took everything from him, including his children. He argues, quite intellectually, that the method in which this occurred was entirely unjust.

John is extremely smart and educated. He is put together, clean shaven, and does not appear homeless. He does not take part in substance abuse. In fact, John turned down a job

from a brewery because he does not drink, and does not want to begin drinking. The job may have helped him escape his homelessness, yet, he realizes that being sober is more important than having a home. John is not the type of person you picture when you think of a homeless person, and there is no doubt that he has skills and knowledge to share. He is smart. He has chosen to live near a security camera, as to avoid violent acts against them, and he sleeps next to a heating grate, to keep him warm in Cleveland's winter. After each time we visit him on Labre, he fills us students with knowledge and new ways to think about the world.

John quite literally lives on a sidewalk. We often think that education comes in a classroom. Yet I believe I have learned some of the most important things about life on that sidewalk. I am overjoyed that I have chosen to sit on that sidewalk and include this man in my life. Sometimes wisdom comes next to a heating grate.

When reflecting on my decision to give money to the woman I met while waiting for John, I thought of the Biblical story of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes. This story speaks of the importance of sharing. Even as Jesus and the disciples have nothing other than five loaves of barley and two fish, Jesus does not listen to the disciples' belief that what they have was insufficient. The lesson of this story is that we must learn to give even in our poverty. Often we are attached to our goods and we fail to give, even when we have abundance and others have close to nothing. When we fill our hearts with love though, we learn to share, and in doing so we help bring about God's kingdom on Earth. Due to love, "twelve baskets were filled with leftover bread and fish", leading to a "communion with God and among people" (Gutierrez 200, 201). As Christians, we are invited to share so that marginalization no longer exists in society. As we share, society will become,

"inclusive where no one remains outside and no one is missing. The table [will] offer a welcome in which 'the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame' are all invited (Luke 14:21), the despised and dirty, the migrant, the 'bad and good' (...Matt. 22:10...)" (Gutierrez 202).

Often I think that I do not have enough to share. When the lady asked me for the \$10, my initial thought was I need this \$10. The truth of the matter is that I really do not. I have enough wealth that I can survive quite fine without it. She most certainly needed it more than me. My attachment to my money, however, admittedly made it hard for me to give it away. Watching the lady walk away with joy, praising the heavens, however, made me more than glad that I had been able to share with her. I consider the interaction I had with this woman to be a moment of God. I further consider every conversation I have had with John to be a holy conversation. When we bring him food on Friday nights, Labre shares so that John is no longer marginalized. The love I have for John makes me look forward to the meal I can share with him. It is moments with John, when I share in his humanity, that I realize what Gutierrez said rings true: "only in a world in which everyone has already eaten will we be able to find each other completely and live in fraternity" (201).

Conclusion

The five individuals I interviewed experience homelessness for different reasons. Adrian claims he experiences homelessness due to his struggle to deal with the trauma of his childhood as well as the capitalistic society we live in. Tom states he experiences homelessness due to a loss of employment and physical disabilities. Pam points to the death of her husband and the unwillingness of her children to help as the cause of her homelessness. Jim claims that an inability to find work caused his homelessness. Eric recognizes his divorce and his abuse of alcohol as events that led to his homelessness.

Adrian and Jim's homelessness are related to substance abuse. Adrian began abusing substances before he became homeless, in an attempt to deal with the trauma of his childhood. Jim began abusing substances in an attempt to cope with his state of homelessness. Adrian and Jim also continue to stay homeless due to their inability to find work that pays sufficiently. Jim struggles to find work in general, as he struggles to be presentable at interviews, and Adrian has a history of struggling with the low wages of the employment he has held.

Tom and Pam continue to be homeless due to a lack of support of social services. Both feel they are unable to work; Tom struggles from COPD and a degenerative arthritis of the spine. Pam has a hurt arm, as well as a lack of work skills due to the fact that she was dependent on her husband for most of her life. Tom has been unable to receive disability from social security and is waiting for the day, three years from now, when social security can no longer deny him. Tom is also a veteran, but he did not mention the VA helping him. Pam receives some support from the VA, but their support came too late for her to keep her home and the support does not provide her enough to be housed. Social security refused to help her when she was about to lose her home, and did not tell her that she has been eligible for benefits for the last three years.

When asked if they thought that homelessness was caused by individual fault, society's injustices, or some combination of the two, all five homeless individuals answered that homelessness is caused by some combination of individual fault and society's injustices. This reality is also true for the majority of them. All five of these people fit into Shaw's archetypes of the homeless: Adrian, Jim, and Eric could be seen as addicts; Tom and Pam could be seen as bums as well as unlucky. These archetypes clearly do not tell the complexity of these people's stories though. Adrian and Jim have chosen to misuse substances, but they both have done so in an attempt to cope with their poverty. Tom and Pam have both chosen not to work, but they both have done so due to their disabilities, disabilities which society has not supported them with. These people's stories are complex. They are homeless due to the way their family has treated them, the way in which society is set up— with its lack of affordable housing and jobs that provide living wages— and due to their own personal shortcomings and choices.

Sarah and Greg were not formally interviewed, and so it is hard for me to draw any sort of conclusion as to whether their homelessness has been caused by individual fault, society's injustices, or some combination of the two. It can be said, however, that these people's homelessness was likely caused by their mental illness, they in fact fall within Shaw's archetype of the nut. Both individuals suffer an isolation from society, as most people do not feel comfortable interacting with them. It is possible that our stigmatization of the mentally ill have kept them from receiving housing, although after fourteen years Sarah eventually received such. What can be said is that both of these individuals need help, the length in the years in which they have been/ were homeless points to our society's neglect of the vulnerable of society.

John was also not formally interviewed, yet from the parts of his story he has informally shared with me, I can draw some conclusions. John does not fit easily within any

of Shaw's archetypes. We could possibly consider him a bum, since he turned down employment, we could also possible consider him unlucky, if we should consider his divorce an event of bad luck. It is clear, nonetheless, that John does not fit within the image society usually holds of the homeless. He is extremely knowledgeable and has made the effort to keep himself put together and away from drugs and alcohol. John considers his homelessness to have been caused by injustice. He is very passionate about the ways in which the court treated him in his divorce and considers the event to be proof of the failings of our society.

It should be noted that while it happened that my interviews did not reveal anyone in this project to fulfill Shaw's ex-con archetype, this does not represent the homeless population as a whole. An estimated 54% percent of homeless are ex-convicts and the injustices that revolve around the injustice system certainly are a cause of homelessness (National Coalition 69). It is also very possible that the people represented in this project are ex-convicts, yet this fact simply did not come up in my interviews with them.

Regardless of why the people represented in this project are homeless, I happen to know each one of them personally. I consider all to be dear friends. One does not understand a homeless person until they sit down on a sidewalk with them and enter into their reality. It is when you see where the homeless live and how they live, that you begin to understand their struggles and you begin to look in awe at the homeless and the way they manage to survive in their struggles. As Greg Boyle S.J. said in *Tattoos on the Heart*, we should always be seeking "a compassion that can stand in awe at what everybody in poor communities have to carry, rather than stand in judgment at how they carry it" (183).

The truth is, some of the people who are my dearest friends have made choices that have led to and/or perpetuated their homelessness. While injustice is a huge cause of homelessness, personal fault is a reality. Personal fault has played, at least in some way, into each of these people's stories. Eric uniquely recognizes personal fault to be the cause of his

homelessness. While he recognizes that society's injustices have helped cause homelessness for many of his friends, he does not see this in his own story. What is interesting is that in many ways, he has chosen to be homeless, because while it may not be ideal, it is the best way for him to deal with his shortcomings. Eric's strength and courage allows him to recognize that homelessness is better than alcoholism, similar to John.

I have found that even when a homeless person has become homeless due to their own fault, it is worth the risk to love them. It is worth the risk to love the addict, the ex-con, the bum, the nut, if that's what society wants to call them. For these human beings are beautiful and have a million gifts to offer the world. They have suffered and are suffering, they have felt pain and are in pain. Society may say they are unworthy of love. Society may look down on them and ridicule them. But I say, I care. No matter why you are homeless, I care. Eric has taught me several lessons about resourcefulness, about creativity, about selflessness, and about courage. I am grateful I have had the courage to befriend him.

The homeless are an opportunity for me to grow and learn as I meet another part of humanity. They are an opportunity for love and friendship, and I am thankful for that. They are human beings, and for that, I will give them food, and clothes, and warmth, and I will give them love. They are human beings, and for that, I will help them work through their faults, loving them when they fail, and I will fight against society's structures that work against them. You are homeless, and so I will help. To me it does not matter why you are homeless. You are homeless, and so you need my love and support. I will love and help you. I will listen to your story, lovingly, if you need someone to talk to. But I do not need your story. You do not need to prove to me that you are deserving of help. No matter why you are homeless, you are deserving of love. And love and friendship you will receive. I am happy you are here.

Every Friday night, while on Labre, I have entered a harsh reality. I see the homeless. Those people with nowhere to stay but a tent in the woods, the heating grates of the city streets, or a hole in the wall. People who sleep in the dirt. Those people who may have had no family or friends to talk to all week. People who must carry all their belongings into what they can carry in their arms, with nowhere to call home. People whom have been waiting all day long with a grumbling tummy for food. People who are fighting mental illness, substance abuse, struggling to survive. People who are disappointed in themselves and must live with the rest of society looking down on them.

If I didn't go out on Labre on Fridays, I would miss out on so many moments of God. I swear it is when I face these harsh realities, that I see the biggest light shine. Everywhere, everywhere we can find beauty. In anyone, anyone we can find beauty. And sometimes, God is most seen in those struggling. When you look in the eyes of a homeless man and can see their pain and struggle yet you can feel their hope and strength, there you find God. When you feel yourself moved with empathy, with compassion, there you find God.

There is so much in this world, so many stereotypes, that tries to draw us apart. Yet, the truth is, we are all one big family. All children of God. Each of us created in God's image. No matter who we are, where we come from, where we've been, what we've done, where we are going, or what we will do. We are all simply members of a single humanity. And when that connection is made between two human beings, one of solidarity, of love, God is found.

This is our calling as Christians; to end the divide in society that separates us from the homeless. This means that we must treat them as human beings and befriend them. It also means that we must help fight the injustices they face and work for them to receive housing, their human right. It even means that we must become aware of the ways in which our own lives perpetuate the inequality in our society. The way we, ourselves, and the way in which

our country treats the homeless needs to change. A simple change in how we treat the homeless could radically change a homeless person's life. Ultimately, it is only when we begin to treat the homeless as human beings that we will truly be humans ourselves. As Adrian once told me, "If you don't give somebody the opportunity of hope, then they don't know it exists."

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Appendix

There is nothing in the world like choosing to sit on a sidewalk, in deep conversation with a homeless friend that you love with all your might. Moments as such have been some of the most powerful moments of my life. If this project has moved you to want to have such moments, and to want to take action to help solve the problem of homelessness, the first thing I recommend to you is to go befriend a homeless person. This may mean having the courage to approach a homeless person you know to be living on a city street near your home. It may also mean contacting an organization that works with homeless people in order to find a way you can volunteer there. I have come to understand that once you befriend a poor person, and in this case, specifically a homeless person, your entire life changes.

Friendship is the first step of action because in order to understand what the homeless need and how you can help them, you must understand, at least some, of their reality. Friendship is also extremely important because it does something for the homeless that no other action of yours can do. It allows the homeless to understand that they are human beings, that they have dignity, and that someone loves them and is happy that they are around. It is also friendship that will genuinely move you, and sometimes force you, into action. Once a homeless person is your friend, you are no longer able to live your life turning your back to their condition. You will want to help.

To help, there are two necessary forms of action. One is charity. The person that is your friend is in immediate need. They may be hungry. They may be cold. You should help them. The second form of action is justice. Once you befriend this person, you will never be able to look at the structures of society the same way again. You will find yourself supporting higher wages, more affordable housing, better treatment for substance abusers and the mentally ill, better support for veterans, an easier transition into society for ex-criminals. The

way you vote will change. You will become an activist for certain causes. You will, for example, hold a different stance on the demolition of poor neighborhoods for upscale housing.

If you are interested in taking these steps of action, I would like to offer you some resources in Cleveland to do so. In order to befriend the homeless, I offer for you the following organizations that work with the homeless that would love to have you as a volunteer:

1. Lutheran Metropolitan Ministry:

<http://www.lutheranmetro.org/Volunteer/volunteer.html>

2. West Side Catholic Center:

<http://www.wscenter.org/volunteer-overview/>

3. Catholic Worker Community of Cleveland:

<http://www.ic.org/directory/catholic-worker-community-of-cleveland/>

4. The City Mission:

<http://www.thecitymission.org/volunteer>

If you are interested in taking part in justice work and advocacy for the homeless I turn you to the following organizations:

1. North East Ohio Coalition for the Homeless:

<http://www.neoch.org/volunteer-at-neoch/>

2. Lutheran Metropolitan Ministry's advocacy office:

<http://www.lutheranmetro.org/Advocacy/>

If you are not from Cleveland, shelters and drop-in centers for the homeless can be found all around the U.S., and are only a short google search away. Organizations that are

working for justice for the homeless can also be found in every city. The easiest place for you to start may be The National Coalition for the Homeless: <http://nationalhomeless.org/>.