

NO PLACE for a PLASTER SAINT

On the outside, it looks like I am being charitable, even selfless. It may look like that, but there is more to the story.



By MARK NEILSEN

When I retired last September, I decided to participate in the Ignatian Volunteer Corps, a program for retired and semiretired people that combines service to the poor with spiritual reflection and prayer. That way, I would have something to do with at least part of my time. For my service component, I volunteered two days a week with an agency that serves low-income families, where one of my primary responsibilities is working in the food pantry.

That's how I came to know Delores (not her real name) and her family. Like many other clients, Delores comes to our food pantry to select from a variety of canned, packaged and frozen foods as a supplement to her other food resources. Unlike pantries that simply hand their clients a prepacked bag of food, ours allows clients to select their own food from our shelves. The idea is that, along with being able to select the food they prefer, clients will also maintain a greater sense of autonomy.

This well-meaning attempt to respect the dignity of those we serve has certain defined limits. Much of our food is donated,

so the range of options can be narrow when the stock is down. The amount of food clients can receive depends their family size: two grocery bags to a family of four, for example. Pantry volunteers must enforce these limits, and this can be awkward: After all, when I go to the store, I can pretty much get whatever I want.

Clients react in one of two ways to this situation. One response is to simply accept our framework with good humor, take what they can and go home. The other response is to push the limits, complaining and cajoling to get as much as they can, even overflowing their grocery bags. Delores falls into the latter group.

I try not to judge her or any of our other clients, all of whom have come to us from some kind of desperate circumstance, be they Afghani or Somali refugees, undocumented immigrants from Central America, or veterans of the dysfunctional streets of the city. But plainly said, some are pleasant and easy to deal with — the so-called “deserving poor” — while others are ... more difficult.

I discovered early in my service how much I prefer the pleasant over the difficult,

but it seems my spiritual growth depends much more on the difficult. This may be an example of God's sense of humor. On the outside, it looks like I am being charitable, even selfless, for a few hours a week. It may look like that, but there is more to the story.

Delores represents an irony in my charitable service: I don't like some of the people I am supposed to be serving lovingly. I resent their intrusion into my space and their pushing against the limits I set.

I don't like the way I feel toward them, but the feeling is revelatory: I can't be a plaster saint, even for a four-hour stint in the food pantry. But I have learned to pray more about it, especially in silence when I am in the midst of a difficult encounter — *Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit*. I think about how God loves the most difficult person just as much as I love the most pleasant. Even more.

That is marvelous to behold. Perhaps this is what is meant by putting on the mind and heart of Christ — even if it means becoming aware of just how far we are from that mind and that heart.

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