

Meeting Jesus on the streets of Birmingham

Hand-in-Hand

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It starts with alms and finishes "Hand-in-Hand". The author is an animator and protagonist of this initiative involving of a group of young people and the homeless together, in Birmingham, in the UK.

Birmingham is the second largest city in the UK, and like all of our major city centers, it carries the visible wound of homelessness. Walk through busy streets, you cannot fail to notice those sitting on cold pavements, holding out a cup, or wrapped in thin blankets against the wind. For many of us, it is not just a social problem but a personal one: what should I do when I see someone begging?

It is a dilemma most of us "solve" by crossing the street, avoiding eye contact, and hurrying past. Yet for a Christian, this cannot be a satisfactory answer. The words of Jesus ring in our ears: "Whatever you did for the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me."

Many people justify walking by with the familiar phrase: "If I give them money, they'll only spend it on drink or drugs." And it may be true. But it may also be true that they will buy food or pay for a bed in a shelter. More importantly, whether or not we give money, our call as Christians is not to judge, but to see and to love the person in front of us — someone made in the image of God, someone in whom Christ himself is mysteriously present.

A student initiative

Two years ago, a young woman from the Focolare community in Birmingham began a master's degree at the University of Birmingham. Like many young Catholics arriving at the university, she joined CathSoc — the Catholic Society. CathSoc offers students friendship, support, and a space to live out their faith. Universities today can be difficult places for practicing Christians, so CathSoc often becomes a lifeline.

Each year the members try to do something "special" for Lent. A year and a half ago, someone suggested visiting the homeless in the city center. The idea was for a one-off initiative. But when the small group of students went out and saw just how many people were begging, they decided it could not end there. That day marked the birth of Hand-in-Hand — a project that continues to this day.

More than sandwiches

From the beginning, the students wanted the project to be more than just handing out food. With the words of Jesus – “You did it to me” – in their hearts, they resolved to treat every homeless man and woman not as a stranger, but as Christ himself.

This vision shaped everything. We wanted each person we met to feel, not only cared for, but loved – touched by God’s tenderness. It may sound ambitious, even pretentious, but our desire was simple: to look each person in the eye and see Jesus.

Being a priest, I was able to celebrate Mass with the group before each outreach. These moments of prayer became central to the project. At Mass, we prayed that God would work in us and through us. The atmosphere was always profound – a sense of being gathered by Jesus so that we could then carry his presence to the streets.

Preparing with care

After Mass, we shared lunch together, creating communion among us. Then we divided into two groups:

- one group prepared packets of food and toiletries;
- the other wrote personal messages with a short phrase from Scripture, to be attached to each package.

These small acts of preparation mattered. They reminded us that we were not distributing "charity" in the abstract, but gifts of love, given by name, with a word of encouragement from God.

We then formed smaller groups of at least four people before going into the city Centre. Going in groups has been a blessing. It creates a sense of unity – and Jesus promised that “where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” It also makes it easier to welcome newcomers who might feel shy or overwhelmed.

One young man, who was participating for the first time, admitted: "I feel embarrassed, like everyone is staring at me." He was encouraged, "The important thing is to forget yourself and focus on loving Jesus in every poor person you meet." By the end of the day, his attitude had completely changed. The last person we met was disheveled and unkempt, yet the student said, "I only saw Jesus in him and spontaneously gave him a hug."

Encounters of dignity

One of our first steps is always to ask someone’s name and to introduce ourselves by name. It is a simple gesture, but it restores dignity. Some are unable to hold a conversation, but many are glad to talk and to share part of their story. We note down their names and pray for them in the following week. Again and again, we have been struck by their gratitude – not just for the food, but for our time and presence. “Thank you for stopping to talk to us,” is something we hear often. Many people simply walk past them without even looking.

One encounter especially moved us: after receiving food, a man turned and said, “I’m going to give this to that man over there. He hasn’t eaten for two days.” Even among the poorest, generosity shines.

Signs of Providence

As Hand-in-Hand grew, so too did the signs of God's providence. An elderly couple, unable to leave their home, heard about the initiative and sent £500 to support us. During a harsh winter, a local priest donated 32 brand new waterproof sleeping bags, arriving just as snow began to fall. Others provided toiletries, underwear, blankets, and gloves. Time and again, we saw confirmation that this work was blessed "from above".

Over the past two years, *Hand-in-Hand* has become more than a student project. It is a school of the Gospel, a place where young people learn not only to help others, but also to encounter Christ where he promised to find himself, among the least, the poor, the forgotten.

The homeless friends we meet often part from us with the words, "God bless you." And, in truth, it is we who are really blessed. Every encounter stretches our hearts, challenges our comfort, and teaches us again that to love Christ is to love him in the most vulnerable.

"It could be me"

Normally, over the course of two and a half hours, we "visit" about 30 - 35 homeless people. Although most are men, there are also some young women. We hear many sad stories of people who, through no fault of their own, find themselves on the street. One of our young people said, "That homeless person could be me."

To end the day we meet in a parish hall in the city center to share our experiences. Sharing is very spontaneous and usually has a spiritual dimension. Often, as we return to the parking lot, sharing continues on an individual level. Not infrequently youth ask the adults involved how we found our vocation, as priests or as focolarini in the Focolare Movement.

The young people are very keen to introduce others to the Hand-in-Hand experience and so there are new people every month. Last year more than 50 young people took part in one or more Saturdays.

Although most of the youth involved are Roman Catholic, there are some others who hope to be baptized in the coming year. There have also been three Chinese students with no specific religious faith and an Indonesian Muslim girl. Some of the group expressed a desire to meet 'outside' of Hand-in-Hand and so we now have a monthly Word of Life meeting.

So, what should we do when we see someone begging? There is no single answer. But perhaps the starting point is simply this: do not cross the road. Do not look away. See, listen, and love. For in each person, Christ waits to meet us.