

Wandering through life, they retain their humanity



Peter
FINNEY JR
CLARION HERALD

The elderly African-American man – bent, frail and coughing like a machine gun because of a lifetime of smoking – sat uncomfortably on the edge of his bed in the third-floor dormitory of Ozanam Inn, the homeless shelter on Camp Street run by the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. His bare feet touched the floor.

This might have been any night of the week, but it was about to become Holy Thursday.

Deacon Henry Garon, who has served the poor, the addicted and the mentally ill for the last 29 years at Ozanam Inn, probably never envisioned doing what he has done faithfully every week since his ordination. But on this night, he was Christ's hands – and he had the scissors.

Kneeling down at the old man's feet, Deacon Garon clipped his long toenails.

As Deacon Garon records in his fascinating new book "The Wanderers" – based on his three decades of Christianity

in the trenches at Ozanam Inn – the small act reverberated with power.

"You know, that was a great thing you did over there," another African-American man in his 60s told him.

"Well, I didn't think of it that way," Deacon Garon replied. "The scissors were handy. His toenails were long. They needed trimming. Somebody had to do it. So I offered to cut them for him. He was old, and I wasn't sure he could do it for himself."

Many other nights, the stories Deacon Garon encounters are left unwritten – and even disappear into thin air. The drug-addicted talk freely about the choices that led them to sleep in cardboard boxes beneath overpasses, and they make hopeful professions of personal conversions.

Sometimes, metanoia happens. Most of the time, it doesn't, and Deacon Garon never hears from them again.

It is the relentlessness of the human condition that motivates Deacon Garon and others like him to serve. He taught physics at Loyola University for 39 years and reached more than 9,000 college students, but his ministry with street people has given his life a richness it otherwise would not have had.

Very candidly, some days

he does not want to go to Ozanam Inn, preferring to stay at home with his wife to relax with a book, write or watch the news on TV. But invariably, he will choose to go and something will happen that night, perhaps listening to a man who is contemplating suicide. The evening has purpose.

"I can enter their world, then leave their world," Deacon Garon writes. "They, on the other hand, cannot do the same with respect to my world."

Sometimes Deacon Garon admits that his ministry falls short. As a married man and father of four with a full-time job, he did not have the time to help one man look for a job. "You say you're a Christian!" the man scolded him. "Well, I love God, too. That's easy to say, but let me see you go out of your way and really do something for me!"

And then the man walked out of his life.

One of the most powerful of the short stories in the book describes an event that took place after Katrina. A bus taking out-of-towners on a hurricane "misery tour" parked on Camp Street near the front entrance of Ozanam Inn.

Inside the tinted windows, the shadowy images of tourists could be seen snapping pictures of the men and women

lined up for sandwiches.

One of the men told Deacon Garon: "It was as if they were at the zoo, taking pictures of animals."

Deacon Garon said he had no ready answer because, upon introspection, he realized "I, myself, had at one time harbored a disdain for (such) people. ... In my heart, I knew I was not really so far removed from those he criticized."

What can Catholics do that will make an impact? Deacon Garon said Ozanam Inn operates strictly on donations, so that would be a good start. He also suggested that people keep peanut butter crackers, small cans of Vienna sausage or granola bars in their cars to give to people who approach asking for money.

"Most of them are hungry," he said.

The faces may change, but the line of hungry people never disappears at Ozanam Inn. Deacon Garon refuses to despair.

"It makes me feel like I'm doing something to better things, and it's something that the Lord Jesus wants us to do," he said. "I never feel like going there. I have to drive myself to go. But after I get there and I'm there with them, I'm glad I went."

Peter Finney Jr. can be reached at pfinney@clarionherald.org.