Maddie's cart

Jon DeBellis
7/19/2018 7:34 AM

It's called Maddie's Cart, but it's not really Maddie's.

Named after The Madeleine Parish in Northeast Portland, this traveling food, beverage, amenity-providing roaming van actually belongs to the people it serves.

People like . . . well. I guess we'll call him Pete.

Pete fought for the U.S. military in Afghanistan, and after just 15 minutes of chatter over a cup of Joe (and grabbing some fresh socks, a shirt and some grub provided by Maddie's Cart), he explains to me that after serving his country in war, he found himself lost upon his return.

"They taught me how to live in a time of war, but not a time of peace," he tells me. "I feel more at peace living here on the streets."

I'm proud of Deacon Mike O'Mahoney of The Madeliene. It's because of his diligence (and all his volunteers) in getting Maddie's Cart together, that I saw the face of Christ in Pete. And so many others.

Maddie's Cart volunteers gather on Monday nights at The Madeleine— tucked sleepily amongst leafy trees and cozy old Portland homes in Northeast Portland.

On these evenings, the kitchen at The Madeleine School becomes a whirlwind of chili-stirrin', cornbread-batter-pourin', tortilla-fryin', burrito-foldin', sandwich-makin', snack packin', coffee brewin', dish washin' mayhem.

Folks gather into a circle of prayer after preparing the meals, before loading everything into the van to deliver to folks living on the streets.

I was reminded in this circle, of how we a eucharistic people. About how the supernatural food we partake in during the sacrifice of the Holy Mass leads us to lead holier lives. I was reminded of the richness of the faith, and that yes, I should participate in the sacraments more, pray more — work on my relationship with God, his holy Son and the Holy Spirit more, yes — but also to do more of this. This. What they're doing tonight. Going out to where people are. To spread love — inspired by faith — to those who need it most.

We learned about what people living on the streets need: Food, clean water, clean underwear, diapers, female hygiene products, fresh socks and maybe, just maybe, not so many jalapeños in the burritos.

No one knows the solutions to homelessness. There are arguments back and forth about the best ways to deal with it.

But in the meantime, while better, more clever minds think on that, I had coffee and snacks with people like . . . well. I guess we'll call him G.

G and I talked about the horrible car accident in which he was injured. We talked about growing up with a strong mother and sisters. We also watched around five minutes of Sleepers vs. Supercars on YouTube on a friend's borrowed cell phone.

If you've never seen the film, it's footage of cars that look like they would easily be beaten in a race against designer sports cars, but huzzah, not so much.

These "sleeper" cars come in the form of old beaten-down Jeeps, dirty old Subarus, paint-chipped Dodge pick-up trucks, dusty Volkswagen Rabbits, and cranky 1980s Mazda 6s. But looks are deceiving, for underneath their hoods are harbored ridiculously powerful engines.

And while we laughed over all these Ferrari-Porsche-Lambroghini-Bentley-Lotus-BMW-drivin' fools who lost to a supercharged Ford Focus; I was reminded of something.

We don't know what kind of engine is in someone until we communicate. We don't know what someone's experience, pain, capacity for love or needs are until we have a friendly race.

So, I hope these words inspire more people to do as Deacon Mike O'Mahoney and his volunteers at Maddie's Cart have done.

Go out there. Talk with folks about their needs —   physical, mental, spiritual, Internet-viral. From your sister to a person you pass on the street.

Because we all need love.

And if there's a big thing we as Catholics should be thankful for — it's that our religious faith, our community of eucharistic people, (sustained and fed by Christ's sacrifice) constantly remind us of that very fact.

DeBellis is managing editor of missals and periodicals at Oregon Catholic Press in Portland.