

I sometimes feel like a hypocrite. I pray that I will recognize Jesus in my fellow man but have no trouble passing by the hitchhiker or the panhandler. I feel danger in picking up a hitchhiker and figure the panhandler will go off and buy a bottle of booze. How should I respond in these situations?

Unfortunately, we sometimes have to balance our desire to practice charity, one of the theological virtues, with our need to practice prudence, one of the cardinal virtues. In our complicated times, it is not always easy to recognize Christ in our neighbor. It is not always clear what is the appropriate way to act. Sometimes we have to be creative.

If you feel fearful of the hitchhiker who is standing by a disabled vehicle, maybe you can call the police for assistance, notify a tow truck, or offer to go pick up a gallon of gas. You can contribute to local shelters and food banks, or to the St. Vincent DePaul Society, and then refer the panhandler to them for assistance.

When we were in Bosnia on pilgrimage to Medjugorje, we were instructed to give our donations to the nuns at the church because they knew the ones truly in need. When someone approached us, we were simply to say: "Go see sister." This was good and prudent advice. I met one young "beggar" outside of church and saw him later that day relaxing at an outdoor café having a beer.

Another time I was in Washington D.C. on vacation and I decided to take a walk after dinner and ended up in a rougher neighborhood. As I passed a group of men by the side of the road, I casually nodded my head in their direction and said, "Good evening." Well, one of the men split off from the group and hurried to catch up and walked along side of me. He told me about all his troubles and how, of course, he needed some money. It probably wouldn't have been safe to reach for my wallet in this situation, even if I thought his need was legitimate. And so I stopped where I was and explained to him that I was with my family on vacation and didn't have extra money to spare. But I offered to pray for him. I told him I was an ordained minister and asked if he would like me to give him a blessing, and to my surprise he said yes. And so, on a street corner in Washington D.C., I placed my hands on this stranger's head and prayed over him. I don't know if it was the wisest thing to do, or if I would do it again, but it seemed right at the time.

Often, all we need to do is make eye contact; to acknowledge the existence of our fellow man. This can be a great blessing in itself. Eyes are the window to the soul, and sometimes this exchange can bring greater joy than physical assistance. And sometimes it can help us see more clearly how we can be of assistance.

Deacon Joe