

# Baltimore pastor, city, differ on homeless relocation

It's the Bible vs. the government for St. Vincent de Paul, Baltimore, pastor Father Richard T. Lawrence.

When it comes to giving sanctuary to the homeless people who set up camp in a park outside his parish, Father Lawrence said he'll choose the Gospel.

Baltimore City officials recently interviewed 22 homeless at St. Vincent de Paul through an agreement with the church and discovered many faced severe health risks.

"We were alarmed to discover the high vulnerability of the people there," Diana Glauber, Baltimore's president/CEO of homeless services, said. "We want to serve the people right now."

The city would like to place the people of the park in housing and shelters, but it is concerned more might flock to the park and there will not be enough housing space to serve them as well.

"Our (the church's) temptation is to lean too far, to try to be compassionate and be enabling," Father Lawrence told The Catholic Review. "Their temptation is to not be enabling and not be compassionate."

Glauber said the city respects the privacy of St. Vincent de Paul, but encouraged Father Lawrence to close the park after the current group of homeless leave.

"They're committed to do something for the homeless, and so are we," Father Lawrence said of Mayor Sheila Dixon's administration. "Like all city administrations, they're under pressure to pretty things up for the tourists."

Downtown Baltimore attracts thousands of visitors during the summer who visit the Inner Harbor or watch a game at Oriole Park at Camden Yards. Father Lawrence knows that the picturesque skyline, which many around the country have come to

identify with the city, does not jive with the setting around his church.

“We’ve got to understand that the tourism industry is important to Baltimore,” he said. “It should be.”

Father Lawrence’s parish has long been a place of refuge and comfort for the vulnerable. The area has attracted drug dealers and prostitutes, which he has tried to combat.

Father Lawrence looks at the removal of homeless at City Hall during prior mayoral administrations as a reason to be skeptical of the government’s intentions.

“You know how many (homeless) used to live in front of City Hall? The city sterilized that plaza,” Father Lawrence said, “and they would much prefer that we do the same thing.”

Ms. Glauber said the city and the church have regular talks and hopes a resolution can be found. “We just agree,” she said, “to disagree.”

Paul McMullen contributed to this article.