

Death of a salvation salesman

At one point in Arthur Miller's classic play, "Death of a Salesman," hapless Willy Loman realizes that he's worth more dead than alive. It's a hell of a place to be.

News reports in recent weeks about a homeless man buried within the walls of Vatican City created a crude echo of that sentiment. One monsignor said the death of Willy Herteleer, a homeless man who lived on the streets of Rome around St. Peter's Basilica, highlights the "throwaway culture" and upside-down values our society has adopted.

"The death of an elderly man on the streets made the news, not because he died, but only because he was buried in the Vatican," said Monsignor Giuseppe Antonio Scotti, adjunct secretary of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications. "The burial was more important than the death of the man."

Herteleer lived on the streets – all his belongings fit into a folding grocery cart. But he was well known to the Swiss Guards at the Santa Anna Gate, one of the entrances to the Vatican. He was also known to priests and others who bought him lunch and cappuccino.

Herteleer was apparently a man of great faith, attending daily 7 a.m. Mass at the Parish of St. Anne, near the gate. Nearby, along the Via de Porta Angelica, there are tourist shops, currency exchanges, food trucks and itinerant salesman hawking "genuine" handbags from designer names. Herteleer spent much of his days engaging with tourists and visitors, not selling purses or tchotchkes, but salvation and mercy.

Monsignor Americo Ciani, a canon at St. Peter's Basilica and friend of Herteleer, told Vatican Radio that the elderly man – thought to be about 80 – would lean against a lamppost along the road that led tourists and city residents to and from St. Peter's Square and talk to them about their faith.

"Very often he would engage with someone, asking, 'Do you go to confession every now and then? Look, going to confession is necessary because if you don't, you won't go to heaven!'" the monsignor recalled.

Herteleer spoke with people about the Lord, and often invited them to the celebration of the Eucharist, which the homeless man called "his medicine."

Permission was granted to have Herteleer, who was Flemish and Catholic, buried in the small Germanic cemetery where Swiss, German and Flemish nobility and church benefactors had been laid to rest. According to Catholic News Service, the cemetery was founded 1,200 years ago for German pilgrims who died in Rome.

In his homily at the funeral Mass, Monsignor Ciani said he thanked God for letting

him and the other canons of the basilica get to know Herteleer, “a man who appeared to be alone, but who never felt alone because God’s grace was present in him.”

Willy Loman the salesman is certainly intended to evoke the “low man,” the one for whom nothing goes right. And if one thinks of a man who spent years on the streets of Rome homeless, you might think he, too, is a low man. But Herteleer was exalted by his relationship with the Lord, and he lifted up others from his lowly state.

In this year’s cold snap, at least 22 deaths in the U.S. have been attributed to the cold. Those who are homeless are especially at risk for hypothermia. Herteleer reportedly collapsed on a cold December night in Rome; concerned passersby called an ambulance. He died Dec. 12.

It is truly sad that Herteleer’s death is more spectacular by his burial, than for his life. His life - and death - should engender a greater concern for the homeless, the cold, the lonely. The death of this “salesman” of faith should inspire us all to compassion.