

‘Homeless Jesus’ finds a permanent haven in Baltimore parish

From across the dusty, shaded park next to St. Vincent de Paul Church in Baltimore, the man sleeping on the bench doesn't look so different from the woman resting on another bench.

His head and body are covered with a blanket, though his feet peek out. Investigate under a fold of the blanket to see the bronze man's face, an eye closed in sleep and a bit of his nose and cheek.

And the feet? Each is marked with a nail hole.

This is "Homeless Jesus," a sculpture by Canadian artist Timothy Schmalz. Versions of the sculpture have found homes across the globe and, now, in an urban park where people experiencing homelessness find refuge.

"We hope people will come to the park and see it," said Father Ray Chase, pastor of St. Vincent de Paul. "The hope is that it will be an opportunity to gain insight on homelessness."

Bishop Denis J. Madden will dedicate the statue and its permanent place in the park after concelebrating 10 a.m. Mass July 15 with Father Chase.

"It's a reminder for all of us, that's where Jesus locates himself - among the poor," Bishop Madden told the Review in a telephone interview

Schmalz, a Catholic, was inspired to create the first Homeless Jesus after seeing a homeless person on the streets of Toronto, where he works.

"I felt I saw something sacred," he said. "I went back to the studio and sculpted it."

Schmalz said he hoped to see Homeless Jesus installed in cities around the world. Copies can be found from Capernaum to Rio de Janeiro to Sydney, as well as at the Vatican and the headquarters of U.S. Catholic Charities in Washington, D.C.

“It is happening, beyond my wildest imagining,” Schmalz said.

A lightweight, resin version was on display in the Archdiocese of Baltimore during Lent in 2017, starting at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Baltimore. It moved on to schools and other parishes, and spent last December at St. Andrew by the Bay in Annapolis.

According to Colleen McCahill, pastoral associate of St. Vincent de Paul, the permanent statue was gifted to archdiocese by an anonymous donor. In September 2016, Archbishop William E. Lori proposed to Father Richard T. Lawrence, then the pastor, that the parish was the best home for the statue.

“He (Father Lawrence) had been so instrumental – he and the parish – in making that park a haven,” Bishop Madden said.

A bit of green space measuring only a third of an acre, the park has sheltered people down on their luck for many years. It is open around the clock, with the exception of 7-9 a.m. for cleaning.

“The parish has long been a witness to those who are experiencing homelessness,” McCahill said.

Placing the statue required no small deliberation. Outside the park, where it would be seen by passersby, seemed to some as it would send the wrong message: “It was almost as if Jesus didn’t belong in the park,” McCahill said.

The statue was placed near the northwest corner of the park, close to the southern end of the Jones Falls Expressway, and required the relocation of another bench.

The result, McCahill said: “It’s understood that Jesus belongs to everybody.”

McCahill said the statue is lifelike enough to seem like a real person – until observers realize it’s a sculpture representing Jesus.

“Our hope is they’ll (visitors to the parish) get involved in some particularly way – especially advocacy,” said Father Chase, who envisions the statue becoming a pilgrimage site, a place to reflect on the Beatitudes and Jesus’ parable in Matthew

25:40-45, regarding taking care of “these least ones.”

In addition, Father Chase said he hopes the sculpture will remind the people who frequent the park that Jesus identifies with them and their plight.

“Our hope is that the statue of Homeless Jesus will remind them of the truth of who they are,” Father Chase said. “That little boy with all those dreams; he’s still there. That little girl with all those dreams; she’s still there.”

The sculpture of Jesus and his park bench weighs some 700 pounds. It is set apart on a flagstone patio flanked by two stone planters and two narrow bluestone-topped benches to promote prayer and reflection, according to McCahill.

Charley Despeaux, a carpenter based in Anne Arundel County, installed the patio, built the benches and finally installed the sculpture June 28.

He came to St. Vincent de Paul by way of the Helping Up Mission, where he recently finished a 12-month spiritual program. He recruited other Helping Up clients during the three months – including rain delays – that it took to prepare the property and install the statue.

Despeaux took a look at the statue, he said, and “pictured somebody sitting on that bench and getting a little shot of hope.”

Alphonso Blackstone Jr., who volunteers at St. Vincent de Paul through the food program of Our Lady of the Fields Parish in Millersville, was in the park the day the statue was installed.

“The message is clear and strong: to let you know Jesus is with the poor,” Blackstone said. “When you’re serving the poor, you’re serving Him. It’s saying, God hasn’t forgotten.”

Mary K. Tilghman is a freelance writer for the Catholic Review.