

St. Vincent de Paul Parish temporarily closes park used by homeless

St. Vincent de Paul Parish has closed the corner park adjacent to its downtown Baltimore church, forbidding visitors to sit or sleep there as has been the custom of people experiencing homelessness for many years.

Since Sept. 21, the park's gates have been locked and yellow caution tape has been strung across the church steps. Signs have been posted saying the park has been closed due to vandalism, drug use and drug sales.

Parish representatives notified regular visitors to the park, many of them homeless, during the three days prior to the closure, according to Colleen McCahill, pastoral associate.

The closure has been prompted by growing problems with illegal drug sales, vandalism and aggressive behavior, initiated by a new group of people, according to McCahill. She said the issue has been brewing since mid-August when two or three people, sometimes with others, started sitting on the front steps of the church for the purposes of selling an illegal street drug commonly called "K2."

"It is the drug of choice if you don't have any money," she said, adding that it is commonly sold to the most vulnerable people. "We don't want it anywhere on our property.

Signs posted in the park state that drugs are not allowed.

As the situation has gotten worse in recent weeks, the police have been called in, McCahill said.

Police told one man he was not allowed to remain on the property but he refused to leave even after being served a barring notice, which is an official notice of illegal trespassing. In fact, the men disrupting the park still remain outside the church.

"They can't be allowed to dictate the way things are," she said.

The presence of these people has affected the homeless men and women who take refuge in the park, McCahill said. Some have expressed their worries about staying there, especially at night. "So it was very discouraging," McCahill said.

The parish purchased the city park on the corner of President and East Fayette Streets in 2000. By then the small green space surrounded by a wrought iron fence had become a place to rest for those experiencing homelessness or near homelessness. Father Richard Lawrence, then the pastor, defended the people's right to rest there.

Since the parish took it over, it has set up strict rules, including closing the park for cleaning 7-9 each morning and allowing no belongings to remain at the park.

Parishioners have gotten to know some of the regulars, some of whom attend Mass, McCahill said. Working with their homeless neighbors has been a ministry said McCahill, who considers the park and its visitors a special part of her everyday work.

"We see all kinds of wonderful promise in everybody," she said.

In July 2018, the park became a site for "Homeless Jesus," a sculpture by Canadian artist Timothy Schmalz. Versions of the sculpture can be found across the globe where homeless people find refuge. It has not been vandalized.

"People are very respectful of Homeless Jesus," McCahill said. "They've told us how much it matters to them."

She said that closing the park has made visiting the sculpture impossible.

"For us this is really tragic," she said, noting the parish's witness to Baltimore City: "All are welcome here."

A newsletter notifying parishioners of the closure was sent Sept. 24. Another letter went out Sept. 25 to the churches and organizations who minister to people in the park.

The parish council will take up the issue during its Oct. 8 meeting.

"I know this is not the end of the story by any means," McCahill said, adding that she hopes the park will reopen. Closing the park may be a necessary step to reassess the best way to minister to people who come there, she said. "Then we're going to go forward and it's going to be good. Because it has been good."

Father Ray Chase, pastor of St. Vincent de Paul, emailed a response to the Review.

"I hope your article will cause people to pause and realize that the homeless they encounter are uniquely God's children and their present circumstances are rooted in the complex stories of their lives," he wrote. "It will only be through our willingness to listen to those stories that we'll have the knowledge that enables us to respond, as persons and as a society, with effectiveness and compassion."

A request for comment from the city police department had not been answered as of Wednesday afternoon.