

# Homeless Jesus

by Timothy P. Schmalz

*An internationally recognized symbol of compassion and awareness for the homeless*

*“You should defend those who cannot help themselves. Yes, speak up for the poor and needy and see that they get justice.”*

— Proverbs 31:8

BY JOHAN VAN PARYS, PH.D.

**O**n NOVEMBER 19, 2017, The Basilica community marked the first annual Day of the Poor instituted by Pope Francis. On that day we celebrated a special evening prayer with our Schola Cantorum and StreetSong-MN, a choir comprised of people who are or were homeless and those who advocate for them. The congregation that evening included several of our homeless friends. At the end of the service we all processed outside to our newly installed sculpture of the *Homeless Jesus* facing Hennepin Avenue. Under a beautiful blue late fall sky, we blessed the sculpture with prayers, songs, and holy water.

*Homeless Jesus*, by Canadian artist Timothy P. Schmalz, is an internationally recognized invitation to love and compassion. It depicts a homeless person sleeping on a park bench. His face and hands are obscured, hidden under a blanket. The

wounds on His feet reveal that this homeless person is Jesus. The work is inspired by the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25. Its stated goal is to encourage compassion toward those who are homeless and to motivate concrete actions to end homelessness.

Schmalz is a well-known Catholic sculptor based out of St. Jacobs, Ontario; much of his work is religious. His overall artistic goal is twofold: “creating art that has the power to convert” and “creating sculpture that deepens our spirituality.” He further states, “If my sculptures are used by people as a tool to think, then I’m very happy.”

About *Homeless Jesus*, Schmalz said, “some people might think that if He’s not depicted as beautiful in a very specific way then we are insulting Him, but that’s not true.” Indeed, Jesus depicted as a homeless person almost unrecognizably wrapped



Dedication of the Timothy P. Schmalz *Homeless Jesus* bronze sculpture on November 19, 2017, the World Day of the Poor.



in a blanket and sleeping on a bench is a shockingly earthly portrait of Jesus. It can be upsetting to those who are more comfortable seeing Jesus depicted in grand and glorious ways. However, sometimes we need to see Jesus as one of us, sharing the fragility of our human condition, in order for us to awaken to the demands of our faith.

About two years ago, recognizing the transformative power of art in general and of *Homeless Jesus* in particular, the members of our St. Vincent de Paul Steering Committee explored the possibility of adding the sculpture to The Basilica's sacred art collection. As part of their careful deliberation they engaged some of our homeless friends in the conversation. When asked what they thought about this sculpture, one homeless person commented, "that could be me one night." Someone else said she would be honored to have this sculpture at The Basilica. A third person said, "it shows that The Basilica cares about us...all of us."

After months of prayer and discussion the St. Vincent de Paul Steering Committee brought the idea to the different leadership teams of The Basilica. The conversation with each one of these groups was extended and profound. In the end, each group saw great value in this initiative and recommended moving ahead to our Parish Council. The Parish Council approved the commissioning of the sculpture in early 2017. Funding for the sculpture was provided by a group of anonymous supporters who are passionate about The Basilica and our vision to seek the well-being of the city.

*Continued.*

Dedication of the Timothy P. Schmalz Homeless Jesus bronze sculpture on November 19, 2017, the World Day of the Poor.



PHOTOS / ELYSE RETHLAKE



The decisive factor for everyone involved was the two-fold mission of our St. Vincent de Paul Ministry: emergency assistance and continuing education. For decades, The Basilica community has offered emergency assistance to those in need. And we will continue to do so. As a parish we also have the responsibility to educate people in the social teachings of our Church and to invite everyone to help those in need. *Homeless Jesus* does that very well because it invites people to think in new and different ways about our brothers and sisters who are homeless. It helps us to see Jesus in each person we meet, especially in those who are most in need.

*Homeless Jesus* is located prominently near Hennepin Avenue for everyone to see: a quiet but strong visual sermon, a sculpted challenge, and a bronze invitation to authentic Christianity. With The Basilica as its backdrop it proclaims to the world that we are committed to assist all those in need because in each one of them we recognize Jesus.



Sculptor Timothy P. Schmalz with his *Homeless Jesus* work dedicated on November 19, 2017.

We ended the dedication of *Homeless Jesus* by taking turns sprinkling the sculpture with holy water while singing *A Place Called Home* by Michael Joncas. Father Bauer went first followed by Timothy P. Schmalz, who flew in for the dedication. Then the holy water was handed from person to person, including our homeless friends. The striking words of the song and the tenderness of this gesture moved many of us to tears.

*Homeless Jesus*, guide us and intercede for us now and forever. Amen. ✚

*Johan M.J. van Parys has been The Basilica's director of liturgy and sacred arts since 1995.*

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