

Making Time for Charity

The Pulitzer Prize winning author and poet Mary Oliver has a new book entitled, *Blue Pastures* (Harcourt Brace Publishers, New York, 1995). "Creative work needs solitude," she comments "It needs concentration without interruptions. It needs the whole sky to fly in and no eye watching until it comes to that certainty which it aspires to, but does not necessarily have at once. Privacy then, a place apart — to pace, to chew pencils, to scribble and erase and scribble again."



How beautifully she captures the writer's dilemma, trying to find time and solitude. It isn't easy. For a busy person finding the solitude to write is always a challenge. My muse usually comes late at night, but recently I was struck by an idea for a column in mid-afternoon. I was in deep concentration when the door bell jarred me back to reality. "Nuts!" I shouted. I was all alone in the rectory so the responsibility was all mine. I pushed myself away from the desk and went to the window to see who was at the back door. He was a tall stranger, shabbily dressed and he pressed the bell hard a second time. "I'm coming, I'm coming." I went downstairs and opened the door slowly. I didn't know what to expect. His soft voice surprised me. "Father, do you have anything to eat? I'm hungry."

I was caught off guard. My mind raced. I wanted to help, but we literally

had nothing in the refrigerator, and there was a policy not to give money at the door. Every priest knows that giving cash handouts attracts beggars like moths to a flame. My emotions were now flying in every direction. What can I do? "There's nothing in the refrigerator," I said apologetically.

The stranger saw my quandary and quickly came to the rescue. "Father, I am not alone." He turned and yelled, "Jim!" Out from behind the garage an old man appeared. He was smaller and more bedraggled looking. "We're both hungry," he pleaded.

That did it. I had to find something. "Wait here," I went back to the kitchen and scanned the cupboard. The rows of canned goods were of no use. Then I saw it. Tunafish. Small cans of tuna. I opened two, slapped on some mayonnaise and began mixing. There was bread in the freezer and I toasted four slices. Voila! Two tuna sandwiches and two cans of Coke. There was food after all. I needed the will and imagination to find it. The men left in good spirits.

"Thanks, Father," they chimed, "and God bless you!"

"God bless you," I replied.

I returned to my desk and sat silently. The muse was gone. I had no interest in writing any more. Instead I sat back and just laughed at my earlier annoyance at being interrupted. It taught me the lesson that it's much easier to write about charity than it is to actually do it. The beggars did me a favor. It's not good to live inside your own head too much.