

## Cruel Policy Drives Homeless Poor into the Winter Rains

by Sherry Conablé

As the holiday season approaches, I am reminded of a situation that we have faced in the past relative to the treatment of homeless and poor people in downtown Santa Cruz. I wrote to the City Council about this just two years ago, in 1997, and I am appealing to them once again.

At that time, I had been really embarrassed to see police officers and hosts going up and down Pacific Avenue during rainstorms and forcing homeless and poor people out from under alcoves and overhangs and into the rain, particularly ones who were soliciting donations with a sign.

They were told they had to panhandle in the rain itself, or they would be ticketed and perhaps go to jail. At the same time, more well-to-do-looking shoppers, who had taken refuge from the rain, even in violation

of the distance elements in the Downtown Ordinances, were not bothered.

It was quite clear that there was a directive to law enforcement personnel to force poor people into the rain, one of many ways, I suppose, to get "unwanted" folks out of the downtown. Karen Gillette confirmed that it seemed to be a policy, and it happened again in 1998 as well.

In my experience, officers on the beat do not set priorities: they are told what to focus on. This begs the question, "Where are such orders coming from?"

I do not think I was ever more ashamed to be a resident of Santa Cruz than during that half hour, as I watched how some very poor and fragile people were being treated. And the irony of the juxtaposition could not be missed. Here we were, celebrating the birth of the Prince of Peace, who came to teach, above all, that we are

each other's keepers, that we are called to do unto others as we would do unto ourselves. Yet the very opposite was in play.

The action was cruel, unnecessary, and health-endangering. I went over to commiserate with one man in particular who has been in Santa Cruz for many years, and is disabled. He was standing in the downpour, where he was told he had to be, with a little umbrella, his lower legs and feet getting completely soaked. And though we have often exchanged a word, he simply stared at the ground and would not acknowledge me, obviously too ashamed.

The Santa Cruz City Council should make it clear to law enforcement personnel, at whatever level that needs to happen, that this kind of behavior will not take place this year — that in fact, it will be actively discouraged. I guess the alternative, if it is deemed absolutely impor-

tant, would be to treat all violators equally, including the more affluent shoppers, and move them out in the rain as well!

It is but one example, though a particularly unsettling one, of the ways that the Downtown Ordinances are continually used in a selective way to harass certain kinds of folks. It needs to be stopped. It hurts and defiles our community in a very encompassing and disturbing way.

During this season, we honor not only Christmas but also Thanksgiving, Hanukkah, and the Solstice, among other holidays. All emphasize caring for each other, treating all of creation with respect, and bringing light and love into the world. May we keep those ideals in front of us in each choice we make during the final days of the 20th century, especially in our treatment of some folks whose lives are already quite fragile and in need of support.



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Art by Fritz Eichenberg for *The Catholic Worker*

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