



# St. Francis Soup Kitchen

134 East Church Street Jacksonville, Florida 32202  
Jim and Diane McVety

[www.stfrancissoupkitchenjax.org](http://www.stfrancissoupkitchenjax.org)  
cricketjd@comcast.net

## Newsletter 2018

“All the darkness in the world cannot extinguish the light of a single candle.”  
St. Francis

### PREFACE<sub>oooo</sub>

This publication is more a reflection than a newsletter since a good deal of the content reflects our experiences, observations and insights gained over the 20 years of our entrenchment in the Kitchen operations. For those who only know us from a prior life, you are more than entitled to wonder what happened. It doesn't sound like the hard charging, irascible and forceful personality of old. A conversion, a change of life style and new focus-emphasis, a decision to walk the walk down a different path. So, hang on to your benefit of the doubt and bear with this reflection. It is sincere!

oooo

From a “news” standpoint, all is well. Though our numbers fluctuate weekly, the Kitchen continues to serve a vital need to several hundred who enter for the clothes closet, the food pantry and the dining room.

The long term volunteers still make the place go, albeit noticeably more stooped with each passing year. Make that each passing month! Still the light is on. The ostracized, the despised, unworthy, avoided and outcast continue to be welcomed with a smile.

Week in, week out, it takes place in a large basement which was once a school cafeteria many, many years ago. Seventeen steps down and up which are very difficult for so many of the Kitchen guests who suffer from various maladies.

If you spent the night on the streets, you had no electricity, no heat, no cool, no running water, various pests, and few comforts, the hassle of others; and, then turn the corner into our dining room, the experience begins. There's no focus on the battered tables or the old folding metal chairs. Instead you are now in a room well lighted by God's will and by the volunteers; a virtual egalitarian atmosphere.

By God<sup>oooo</sup>

We are always mindful and gratified that God has provided us with all the facilities and resources needed to feed hundreds of the community's poor each week with a nourishing meal, a bag of canned goods and other edibles, a loaf of bread, a box of sweets, clothing, reading glasses, books and so on. So often we are able to bear witness that the Spirit's presence in the dining room is real.

By the volunteers<sup>oooo</sup>

Often for the first time, young and old volunteers weave their way through the crowd outside waiting for us to open. Some with a frown and many with reservations wondering what they are getting themselves into. At some time or other all of us have crossed the street, avoiding eye contact. They're a nuisance that should be removed like a pest.

A walk around Walden Pond in Concord, Mass. brings you to a large wooden sign on which is engraved a Henry Thoreau quote:

"I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to confront only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach and not, when I came to die, discover that I have not lived."

A Volunteer might be heard to say:

“I went to the soup kitchen because I wished to confront the poor, the marginalized, the impoverished, the powerless, and see if I could learn what they had to teach and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not known.”

So the newcomers get a grip and come into the dining room. They are given a brief orientation, assigned specific tasks and encouraged to smile, to be hospitable and compassionate and listen. They are sincerely labeled as “people of good spirit” by merely showing up to help. Sometimes, they’re reminded that a smile will tell a guest that someone’s home inside!

A smile may be the candle St. Francis was referencing, kindling light, penetrating a guests’ darkness, “littleizing” the shadows of the night before.

Pope Francis has told all of us to encounter people especially the poorest; to engage in corporal works of mercy such as feeding the poor; “love and charity are service, helping others, serving others and being good to those who cannot repay...” About prayer, the Pope has said, “You pray for the hungry, then you feed them. That’s how prayer works.”

Before we open, the volunteers form a prayer circle for the instructions and, holding hands, recite the Lord’s Prayer, Hail Mary and Glory Be plus pray petitions for various individuals and families. Traditionally, this is our last petition:

“For the customers who come through the door today, reaching out for help, that we may look through their eyes and see Christ and receive them with love and compassion,  
We pray to the Lord.”

Then we feed them. “That’s how prayer works.”

By Our Guests<sub>0000</sub>

Some of us call our people customers because we serve. In many respects they serve us. Think about it. It’s not often they get to be in the role of customer. So many are paupers.

For a few moments out of the shadows of their darkness into the glow of a lighted candle, they come, from all walks, all races, all ages bearing many infirmities, various degrees of spiritual richness and bankruptcy, literate and otherwise, disheveled and angry, sullen and smiling; yes, doped up and drunk but so many clean and sober.

Their diversity offers many lessons for us that we keep, lessons about gratitude, grace, empowerment, values, simplicity, tolerance, compassion, acceptance, faith, fortitude and perseverance. You wonder if this is simply a poetic exclamation. It is not!

Here are some comments recently solicited from some customers who have come in over the years. They were asked to be forthright, critical and complimentary. Surprise, no criticisms, only comments like:

From James here since 1984: "Good place. Treat people with respect. Don't get mad. Just remove people with problems. Miss Diane gives me aspirin sometimes. Clothes closet volunteers treat people with respect. Food is good."

From Benjamin here for over 10 years: "They exhibit the Spirit of Christ. They feed the hungry and poor without making them feel lost and poor."

From Mr. Carter here for many years: "Everything is good. Treated ok, food couldn't be better. Volunteers doing a very good job."

From Sally who brings her grand nephews and nieces: "Good. Respect, sweet nice people, clean."

From Johnny Mae around 20 years: "Best people, good to everybody. I always ask God to bless these people and this place. Better than all the others, can feel the spirit of the volunteers. Everybody is equal. Angels with lots of love in this place. Everything we need here with the best food."

These comments highlight what we hope to emphasize each time the Kitchen opens. Feel the Spirit; bring your love through an ardent zeal for this outreach. Love impels us to help the poor. If done from the heart, these efforts put pride to shame the way that humility does. Maybe this is why volunteers are so often heard to say how much they got out of their experience. Pride can be much more expensive than service can be. Just contemplate St. Paul's

list of the fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22, 23) or elements of love (1 Cor. 13:4 –7). Hmmm!  
Haven't spent much yet!

St. Francis is identified as the patron saint of the poor. A study of St. Francis, his life and his lessons, is not a complicated pursuit. Francis provides great help to finding simplicity and spirituality in our daily lives. As an example, contemplate one of his most renowned quotes:

“The deeds you do may be the only sermon some person will hear today.”

Or the best known<sup>ooo</sup>

“Preach the Gospel, use words if you have to.”

There is mutuality between the two quotes. We submit that spiritual growth leads directly to service, to live part or all of our days as servant spirits engaged in any form of positive reach-out to help others. How do we do that? How do we evangelize? How do we grow spiritually? How do we engage ourselves as servant spirits? The answer is somewhat of a self-evident truth. Serve! And then serve some more. Simply put, demonstrate our faith in action by deeds. Doesn't have to be fancy or public or elaborate. Here are a couple of examples of how the Kitchen provides opportunities to perform deeds.

We try to keep two bike locks in stock just in case. Recently a lady rode up on a bike and asked Greg to watch her bike while she went downstairs for lunch. The lady didn't have a lock and we get too distracted to take on the responsibility for her bike. “Hold on, lady, I'll be right back.....Here's a new combination bike lock...” Why, you would think the Kitchen had just substantially impacted her existence. Maybe we have!

But that's not the whole point. Part of it is the deed. It may be a stretch but this simple deed may be a demonstration of faith in action. No words were really needed.

A pair of steel-toed work boots for a man who can take a job if he has them; a pair of reading glasses for a person who can now see clearly and read; a candy bar for a child, rosary beads, a few cartons of shelf milk for a dad who has plenty of cereal and three kids at home; Grace before lunch; comfortable shoes, clean underwear and socks, even Tylenol for the person with a bad toothache.

A mother comes in with her pre-adolescent daughter. Mom explains that her daughter's tee shirt got dirty the night before since they had to sleep on the sidewalk all night. We don't normally keep many children's sizes but Diane went into the closet and searched. The daughter walked out with three new shirts, a bag of candy, some apple sauce, a full belly and a huge smile which we kept.

Is this evangelizing? Again, it may be a stretch but if reaching out and serving is a part then it is. One has to go where the poorest and neediest can be encountered. That's where the Kitchen comes in for so many of us.

An aside.... A Franciscan Friar described his experience while on a long prayerful walk. The friar asked God, "Why do You allow poverty?" The response came in a small voice that shook the friar's soul, "Why do you allow poverty?"

Now for sure we don't alleviate poverty. All we do is very slightly lighten the burden. The meal might be the only one for that day or for a couple of days; the grocery bag might provide a weeks' nourishment until the next meal. The hospitality and compassion might have an impact however so small. We do know the volunteers are touched and the customers are quick with their appreciation. You can see it in their face and in their "thanks."

Faith makes things possible, not easy. It is challenging. It is a burden, at times. Aches, burns, bruises, aggravations, exhaustion, frustrations, worries and upsets from what is witnessed. It can be downright heavy and baffling.

All of that is submerged and overcome by moments of humility, gratitude, community compassion, inspiration, charity, tolerance and joy. Yes, joy! Think about it!

The writer is very mindful of turbulent times many years in the past, but conversion, i.e., life-changing undertakings, and enlightenment are always available for the determined seeker. Discernment is time consuming but not only does the process have its own merits but the result, if acted upon, can place the person in a new realm with entirely new dynamics. There's a lot of wisdom in the axiom, "If the mountain were smooth you couldn't climb it."

Finally and Forever: THANK YOU All!oooo

The benefactors, all the volunteers who help carry the load by their diligence, commitment and loyalty, constantly offering prayers, time and talent and treasure The Kitchen family is huge ever changing with lovely, friendly, wonderful people. If you help in any way and to any extent you are part of the family.

A special thanks to the guests, our customers, for their lessons taught to us in so many ways.

**Finally, we ask you to join us, in your mediations, to**  
**Visualize World Peace**

---