

Nightmares

By Bishop Paul V. Marshall

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[This is Bishop Paul Marshall's November column for secular newspapers, usually 600 words or less, usually different from his column in Diocesan Life. The column is sent to newspapers throughout our 14 counties. It is published by [The Morning Call](#), Allentown, on the first Saturday of every month. It usually appears also in six or seven additional papers at some point during the month. The combined circulation of papers that publish the column regularly is about 400,000. Some 120 columns have been published over the past eleven years.]

I was asked to pray at the recent *Souper Day* event that helps support the many ministries to the needy in my area. I went prepared to deliver the usual, but found myself pulling over to the side of the road to write and then deliver the following.

Thank you. Your executive director asked me to pray, I thought, because Episcopalians are noted for short prayers. Then he asked me to say a few words before praying, perhaps to make up the time difference.

In any event, it is a joy to be with you. My predecessor, Bishop Dyer, held New Bethany close to his heart. We are all delighted in the diocese to know of its growth into a life of its own in our community.

I am eager to be with you today because of the work you are doing, because of your distinguished keynoter, and because of some experiences I've had over the summer that intensify my own interest in the kind of work you are doing.

First, I've just been to New Orleans. I've how much remains to be done there. It seems that, as a country, we have hundreds of billions for defense, but little to help our own people rebuild.

Also this summer, I lost a bit of naiveté, as I learned what many of you have known for years, that agencies committed to doing good are capable of competing with each other and even demeaning each other in the search for funding. That was very hard to take.

Finally, what drives me here today is my recent acquaintance with a man who lives under one of the bridges my town provides for those on the waiting list for homeless shelter occupancy. His mental illness poses an enormous obstacle to his survival, and so far I haven't gotten him to go in the door of any agency.

So, as I thought of coming here, I thought not of a short denominational prayer, but of a prayer I do not have the courage to pray.

It would pray that God would liberally bless everyone here with a sleepless night, a night whose wakefulness was interrupted only by nightmares. In those nightmares, I wish God would give us each a crystal clear vision of poverty. A vision of those kids who don't go to school every day because it isn't their turn to wear the one complete set of clothes their mama can afford. A vision of how hard it is for those mentally ill even to get on a line for

their first routine rejection for Social Security Disability assistance.

In these nightmares, I would ask God to save each of us from the hypocrisy of giving money we don't really miss, that God would make us uncomfortable when giving doesn't cost us.

I would ask God in these nightmares to grill each of us who makes a living doing good or promoting good causes to carefully separate our egos from our vocations.

I would ask for nightmares so that those who routinely and as a matter of policy deny all first requests for disability payments would in their dream see their own mother or father in the shoes of those they deny.

And so on. Lord, you have the picture. Please show it to us in technicolor.

Finally Lord, towards dawn, give each of us a vision of what our community would be like without New Bethany, and open our hearts and wallets simultaneously.

For such a bad night, Lord, we will thank you in the long run. Amen.

Well, I said, I don't have the courage to say that prayer, so we went on to a table prayer, and the usual clown said, "Play Ball."

[The Rt. Rev. Paul V. Marshall is bishop of the Diocese of Bethlehem, 14 counties of eastern and northeastern Pennsylvania. Additional columns and sermons by Bishop Marshall are available at www.diobeth.org.]