Columns
Spirituality
Social Justice



A motorized rickshaw in Mumbai, India (Dreamstime/Rkaphotography)



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At Christmas, one of my friends sent me $20 as a gift. On the envelope she wrote, "Strictly for personal use only." The exchange of $20 in Indian currency came to 1,400 rupees.

I contemplated how best I could spend it for my personal use. I checked online the prices of shoes and clothes, but given the pandemic lockdown situation, I gave up the thought of shopping for myself.

It was Monday, and my reading and reflection was on the martyrdom of holy innocent children (Matthew 2:16-18). Suddenly, I was inspired — why not share that amount with as many people as possible, to get more personal satisfaction than using the gift for myself?

Since I am free from the old "permission culture," on Tuesday I hired a motorized rickshaw from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. I agreed to give him 1,200 rupees for 10 hours driving, with 10 quick halts.

As soon as I got into the rickshaw, I told the driver, "Even in this pandemic situation, if you or I see any needy person on the street, we will offer them a free lift." The driver agreed hesitantly.

Soon we met an indigenous woman carrying a sack of rice on her head and holding an infant at her bosom. We stopped the rickshaw; the driver helped the woman by lifting the sack of rice from her head, placing it in the rickshaw, and then made her sit with me. Upon asking her destination, we were shocked that if we had not stopped, that lady would have had to walk for another 2 kilometers.

The driver looked at me with appreciative eyes, approving my advice to give lifts to needy travelers.

I had planned an itinerary round trip up to 50 kilometers.

After dropping off this woman, we saw another woman waving her hand for a rickshaw to carry her vegetable baskets to the market. Though the market was close by, rickshaw drivers were taking advantage of the COVID-19 situation and looting poor people with a tenfold fare. Again, the driver nodded at my request and helped this woman to load and unload her vegetable baskets for a six-minute driving distance.



Fruits and vegetables I received from families I visited during my day on the rickshaw. On my return journey, I made calls to orphanages and poor families and gave away those gifts — worth 3,900 rupees! (Photo and graphic by Patricia Len Vaz)

We continued this pattern till lunchtime, then paid condolence visits to families with tragic COVID-19 deaths. In between, I noticed the driver getting stressed out after hearing that the house I visited had had a COVID-19 death.

I had sent prior information to the families I was going to visit. They believed that the visit of a religious person would bring blessings to their grieving family. At their request, I wore religious attire. At every house I entered, I did not disclose my prior visit to families where a COVID-19 death took place.

Every family offered me *guru dakshina* (offering to the guru) in the form of money, fresh vegetables from their gardens, full-bran rice from their fields, dry and fresh coconuts, fresh fruits like papaya, chikoos and the like. Fisherfolk families offered

me fresh and dried fish.

By the time I finished my visits, the rickshaw was so full of offerings that I hardly had space to sit comfortably.

On my return journey, I made calls to orphanages and poor families and gave away those gifts — worth 3,900 rupees!

With the 200 rupees I had left, I bought a pair of flip-flops. (When shops were closed down during the pandemic, a widow had asked for my pair of flip-flops for her granddaughter.)

That night, I called my friend on WhatsApp and gave her the details of spending the $20 for my personal use.

Results and lessons I learned from that "personal use" gift of $20:

- I was a recipient of huge smiles of hope on the faces of those who had said their goodbyes to their COVID-19 patients when they left for the hospital, no more to return.
- It was heartening to hear, "Thank you, sister, for visiting us — no priest, no sisters visited us."
- When life was getting tough, I came to believe that "generosity begets generosity."
- The rickshaw driver got a lump-sum income for that day.
- One rickshaw driver from a high-caste Brahminic family was able to get rid of his ingrained bias against untouchables. He could feel the pinch of untouchables being excluded by his Brahminic culture.

My $20 was like the multiplication of two fishes and five loaves (Matthew 14:13-21). Instead of letting his disciples send away the hungry crowd, Jesus converts their attitude of exclusion into inclusion, by sharing whatever meager food that was available. And more than just Jesus multiplying the loaves and fishes, I see a woman — the mother of that little boy — behind this miracle, who had taught her little boy to share his tiffin.

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For me, the coronavirus pandemic is a providential opportunity to learn thousands of ways to minister to the *anawim* — the poor of Yahweh.

I remember the final blessing from Sr. Francisca Hardy from Carmel-by-the-Sea, California. After my spiritual direction session, she said, "Maggie, God is passionately busy beautifying the world by those who work for his poor, and the needy, and the excluded ones."

Waving goodbyes to me, she said, "Grace will lead you home, Maggie." This message has stayed with me forever.

"God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work" (2 Corinthians 9:8). God's vision of shared blessings abounds for all!

When Jesus does equal distribution from just a little, why can't our leaders share a little from the wealth they have hoarded or amassed? Because of a handful of greedy people, scarcity is experienced by many. Our small decisions of sharing whatever we have and we are will bring big change — and hopefully fuel collective actions that share compassion.

Someone has said, "You can give without loving, but you cannot love without giving."

That little boy — from whom the hungry received food and were satisfied — was given the loaves and fishes by his mother. Just as there was a mother behind the little boy of the parable, there was a sick and suffering woman behind this $20 gift. Let us mother people with compassion.

"Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men" (Colossians 3:23). Genuine freedom from within would replace the meaning of gifts designated as for "personal use only."

By sharing this small gift, I experienced the spirituality both/and! I enjoyed the gift as well as reaching out to the needy in compassion.