

“You’ve got to do something”

José María Pardo used to shut his eyes when passing all the indigent people begging in Jaén, Spain. Now a hundred of them can get a good meal each day in a family environment.

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One day back in 2009 I was on my way to my parish church dedicated to our Lady of Bethlehem in Jaén. The indigent people seated on the steps who can so often be found there caught my attention in a

special way that day. My heart was moved by the sight of those poor people looking forlorn in the fierce Andalusian sun. Several of them had their hand out asking for money. In the past I had often tried to shut my eyes to that daily scene, telling myself: "Stop being so sentimental; you're only going to complicate your life." But one day my heart reproached me: "That's enough, you've got to do something for these people." I decided I had to find the funds needed to enable them to get at least one good meal a day.

I am an architect and life has been good to me (with the daily problems any person encounters). While doing my daily period of prayer in the parish church I thought about St. Josemaria's life and his concern for the needy. I had discovered in his biography that the founder of the Work did all he could to find positive solutions for the needs of the sick

and poor in Madrid in the first years of Opus Dei. So how could I be at peace if I shut my eyes to suffering people in my own city? And I recalled how much good it did me (when I was an architecture student back in the 60's in Madrid) to make visits to the poor accompanied by friends from Gurtubay, a center of the Work. I had even found time over several years to give night classes to people who had no access to school and who lived in one of Madrid's slums.

That very day I contacted my good friend Paco and we went to see our parish priest to suggest a possible solution. "We'll need a large dining room where all these hungry people can fit," I told our priest. Our first meal space wasn't exactly huge; we only had eight square meters with four walls and a roof. But it was enough to begin handing out

sandwiches, milk shakes and fruit to nine people.

But you have to give more than food. You also have to give affection to the lonely. Perhaps the key thing is to have patience. We needed a lot of patience because so many needy people started coming that we saw we would need a much bigger kitchen and dining area. We drew up a plan and left it with our parish priest. When the bishop heard about it he said he wanted to visit us and see what our needs were. He was very moved when he saw what we were trying to do and encouraged us to continue our efforts.

A few days later we received the building permit for the new dining room, which we were able to inaugurate just days before the olive harvest began. That's when many poor people make their way to Jaén in search of work.

Today, four years later, we've gone from nine to a hundred hungry people to whom we can offer a warm meal each day. We have become quite a big family, and have even been featured recently in an article in *El Pais* . There's room for everyone. And we're lucky to have the help of volunteers, friends and relatives who have really taken our project to heart. We can now offer hearty well-cooked meals, with beans and chorizo and macaroni with a delicious tomato sauce. We get what we need from the local Food Bank (which has been very generous with us) and from local bakeries, dairies and sausage factories. We are also very grateful for anonymous donations that help cover our costs.

Although it's hard for me to leave my architect's office, where urgent projects are never lacking, I am happy to be able to serve my needy neighbors. And I find the generosity

and dedication that I see in the volunteers quite inspiring. I also want to thank my parish priest, and also St. Josemaria for making my heart sensitive to the needs of those around me.

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