



The Least of These

A symposium on serving people with mental illness

Peter K. Fay, Tobias Winright, Meg Kaveny

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Peter K. Fay says that “[b]aptism requires Catholics to respect the dignity of people with serious mental illness and to treat them with solidarity, justice, and love.” How has your parish or faith community interacted with those living with mental illness, if at all? What would it look like for your faith community to enter into solidarity, justice, and love with those with serious mental illness?
2. Tobias Winright describes the policing model in the United States as “a military or warrior model which centers on the use of force.” He contrasts this with the “social peacekeeper” model of policing wherein “[p]ublic safety is conceived of as a partnership between police, citizens, and other groups.” How have you experienced either of these models? How can policing align with Catholic social thought and teaching?
3. Sociologist Alex S. Vitale “calls for a rethinking of policing’s ‘basic role,’ ‘orientation,’ ‘mindset,’ ‘mission,’ and ‘culture.’” What might this transformation look like for police in the United States, and how might it affect the communities these transformed police departments are meant to serve? Is such a rethinking attainable under our current political system?
4. Americans have long prided themselves on their independence and personal autonomy. Meg Kaveny suggests that in some cases we might sacrifice this personal autonomy for the common good. What does Kaveny mean when she says this? What, if anything, justifies infringing upon someone’s personal autonomy? How do you balance the need to respect someone’s autonomy with the needs of the rest of the community?
5. The institutionalization of people with mental illness and people with disabilities has a history rife with neglect and abuse. Is it possible to create a system of involuntary institutionalization that respects the dignity and freedom of people with serious mental illness?
6. While Kaveny discusses the potential benefits of institutionalization, Peter K. Fay writes that “baptism, rightly understood, initiates people with mental illness into a community from which they cannot be expelled.” Does institutionalization necessarily remove people from their communities? “How might parishes and local faith organizations help institutionalized people remain active in their communities?”
7. The Corporal Works of Mercy call on us to meet our neighbors’ needs for food, shelter, and companionship. People with serious mental illness often face unique barriers to access adequate housing, food, and other resources. What policies need to be in place, locally and nationally, to begin addressing some of these needs?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING:

Alex Miller, “This Friendship Saved Me,” September 14, 2025:

<https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/homelessness-unhoused-veteran-miller-friendship-alex>

Jay Neugeboren, “The Death of a Mental Patient,” July 5, 2019: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/death-mental-patient>

The Editors, “Care, Not Cops,” July/August 2020: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/care-not-cops>

B. D. McClay, “Bad Inheritances,” May 28, 2021: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/bad-inheritances>

Matthew Sitman, “Muddling Through,” July/August 2020: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/muddling-through>