

No can do: Faith at work

by [Garret Keizer](#) in the [November 14, 2001](#) issue

Some time between World War II and the Second Vatican Council a small-town church in northeastern Vermont was destroyed by fire. The congregation immediately launched a vigorous fund-raising campaign to erect a new building. One of the members carried his canvassing so far as to ask the local Roman Catholic priest for a donation. "Now, Harold," said the priest, "you know I can't do a thing like that, give money to build a Protestant church! But," he added, taking out his checkbook, "I'll give you 50 bucks to tear the old one down."

The priest's distinction between what he could and could not do amounts to little more than a transparent equivocation; therein lies the charm of the story. Nevertheless, the priest's reply also serves as a useful guide for those dilemmas that cannot be sorted out simply by some deft verbal maneuver. The priest seems to be telling us: Refuse what you must, but offer what you can.

The principle has at least one biblical precedent in the story of Peter and John and the lame beggar in the temple (Acts 3). "I have no silver or gold," Peter says, "but what I have, I give you." That what he gave proved to be miraculous is beautiful but beside the point, or at least beside my point, which is that although he could not give one thing (money), he readily offered another (healing).

What so appeals to me about Peter's "can't-do-this-but-can-do-that" approach—which was also the approach of the village priest—is how well it locates the sphere of Christian action between timorous self-preservation and guilty self-denial. Neither of these extremes will be unknown to the conscientious worker, the charitable neighbor, the dedicated shepherd of souls. Someone comes to us with a request, and we are suddenly confronted with two fears: the first being "Where will this lead?" if I say yes, and the second being "Who will be hurt?" if I say no. However we choose, we almost always reproach ourselves in the end. Eventually we may reproach God—as people tend to do whenever they have been forgetting that they are *not* God.

The approach taken by Peter and the anonymous priest is of a different order. It simultaneously acknowledges both duty and limitation. It also fortifies us against those requests that are not so much demanding as demeaning. Sacrificing oneself for God is not the same thing as compromising oneself under pressure, however much we may be tempted to think so.

Therefore, I cannot give you an alibi but I will go with you to trial. I cannot extend your deadline but I can help you in meeting this one. I cannot lend you the money but I can help you find a job. I cannot give my approval to your actions but I can confess to you when my own actions were much worse. I do not have time to read the book you say I “must” read (and the thousand other books I’m told I “must” read), but I do have time to chat over a cup of coffee about what you learned from this book.

You may note that in most of these cases the offer is actually more work than the request. To which I can only respond: Freedom is usually more work than servitude. An adventure is more work than a chore. For that matter, a loving marriage is more work than a marriage of convenience. It is not work that scares me but the prospect of working without joy or conviction.

Last June the eighth-grade class in the town where I serve part-time as an Episcopal priest chose me to give the invocation at its commencement. Since four members of the class were also members of my church, I was not too surprised that I had won the election. But it would be dishonest to say that I was happy.

For one thing, I’ve grown increasingly resistant to being trotted out to decorate public occasions “with a few words,” especially when those words take the form of prayer. Never mind what Jesus said about praying in secret; he also said something about not throwing your pearls before swine—which in my experience is what “official” prayers often amount to. I also have grave concerns about the vestiges of “school prayer” (and these concerns have less to do with how school prayer might subvert the Constitution than with how Wicca and Walt Disney might subvert school prayer). Anyway, here was that familiar dilemma: Say yes and feel like a fool and a hypocrite, or say no and feel like an ingrate and a crank.

After some deliberation (and prayer), I wrote a letter to the eighth-grade students thanking them for their honor. I told them that I was declining that honor because, for various reasons, it made me uncomfortable. I also said that I hoped they, too,

would always be able to refuse a request that didn't "feel right." I promised that I would go to my church during their graduation ceremony and pray for their safety and success. In addition, I and a woman from my parish would remain at the church another hour for any student who wished to stop by for a prayer afterward.

Only one student came, one of the four from my church. Her parents, who rarely attend church, came with her. We talked briefly about her future plans. Then we all knelt at the altar. If I say so myself, we gave her a pretty deluxe prayer. We also wrote her name in one of the new Bibles we had laid out as gifts for our visitors.

We sent her off with hearty congratulations. It will perhaps seem that I am now congratulating myself. I suppose I am. Along with this radiant young lady, who went forth that night with virtually every blessing I could put into words, I too had graduated. Thanks be to God.