



St. Jacobs artist's 'Homeless Jesus' sculpture blessed by Pope

It was turned down by churches in Toronto and New York, but a St. Jacobs-based artist's sculpture has found a home in Vatican City.

The sculpture, created by Tim Schmalz, depicts a life-sized Jesus Christ as a homeless man sleeping on a bench.

He offered it to St. Michael's Cathedral in Toronto and St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York, and was turned down both times – St. Patrick's has since said they may reconsider.

Last week, he took the same sculpture to the Vatican to present it to Pope Francis, and came away with a "phenomenal experience" that will last him a lifetime.

"The first thing he did when he saw my sculpture was pray, and then he blessed the piece," Schmalz tells CTV News.

"To have Pope Francis bless your sculpture is one of the most amazing experiences possible."

In addition, Schmalz is now working with Vatican officials to figure out where in the city the statue can be placed permanently.

Although being given the seal of approval from any pope would undoubtedly be an honour for Schmalz, he sees parallels between the message of his sculpture and the message of love for the poor that has been preached by the world's first Jesuit pope.

"In our society right now there's enough money, but there's not enough connection with the spiritual aspects of the poor," he says.

Rev. Terry McGuire, a retired Catholic priest living in Waterloo, says he's not surprised the Pope looked favourably on Schmalz's work.

"I'm sure that the Pope saw that particular creation and thought 'This really resonates,'" he says.

"To me, it coincides with Pope Francis in terms of his care and concern for the poor."

Schmalz describes his statue as "a visual translation of what I think is one of the most important things in the gospels ... that when we see the most marginalized people, we should think of Jesus."

He says people looking at the statue for the first time initially see a homeless person, then notice the crucifixion wounds on the man's feet and realize that it is in fact Jesus being depicted.

"If they see that visual representation, they might be a little more gentle and introspective when they think of the marginalized people," he says.

The bronze sculpture took Schmalz eight months to build, and was inspired by an encounter Schmalz had with a homeless man in downtown Toronto.