The Catholic father and photographer fighting homelessness—by opening up his own home.

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by John W. Miller. December 15, 2025.

Is it loving or crazy to put your children on the sofa for a night so a person living on the street can have their bedroom? Johnathon Kelso thinks it's what Jesus wants.

"I can't save the world," Kelso says. "But if I can do this one thing, shouldn't I do it?"

Kelso's four children, who range in age from 2 to 10, know the drill. They pack up their toys. They pull out the downstairs sofa bed. And they welcome the stranger. Jessica, Kelso's wife, who is pregnant with their fifth child, knows it sounds unconventional at best. She's heard the whispers, the people saying it's not safe. "Living with the poor is not everyone's calling," she says. She tells people they don't have to try this at home. "Johnathon and I do what we do because we've exercised the muscle over the course of 12 years," she says. "In this game, there's a lot of asking people to leave. It's an exercise in boundaries and treating people like they're people."

There are many ways to be a Christian. The Trappists pray seven times a day. Jehovah's Witnesses camp out on street corners. Evangelicals favour mission trips. Kelso's calling is mercy, and it's best manifested, he says, by welcoming people without homes in his modest two-story family house in Decatur, a northeast Atlanta suburb.

Kelso's ministry is drawing more attention among activists in Atlanta, and across American Catholicism, as the U.S. homelessness crisis worsens. This fall (Autumn), I travelled to Atlanta to see how Kelso and his family make it all work and talk to him about the spiritual journey that led him to his vocation.

Unconditional hospitality.

Kelso, 42, looks like he could be pouring beer in one of Atlanta's hipster bars. He wears linen shirts and jeans and has a long monkish beard and tight-cropped hair. By trade, he's a journalistic photographer, and he still has the quick wit and manners of somebody looking for the perfect shot and can ingratiate himself with a kind word and a good joke.

The Kelsos named their home ministry The Porter Gate, after St. Alphonsus Rodriguez, the 17th-century porter famous for his unconditional hospitality at a Jesuit college. The Porter Gate also provides transportation, clothing, meals and ID services. That's Kelso's family-centred ministry on evenings and weekends. In his day job, he also works with the homeless. He's a "homeless services case manager" for Intown Cares, an Atlanta nonprofit that helps people fighting housing and food insecurity. The two missions bleed into each other, with Kelso trying to help people on both fronts, and they form Kelso's vocation and life philosophy. The Kelso way is a challenge to all Christians, and a response to Catholic Vice President JD Vance's claim that there is an ordo amoris, an "order of love" that means we should prioritize our family at the expense of the stranger. Mr. Kelso's answer is clear: The Holy Family would welcome strangers, and so should we. "Every day, the poor give us a chance to love Jesus," he says. "Who knows more about the cross than the poor?"

Kelso grew up agnostic in Niceville, a sleepy town of around 16,000 in the Florida panhandle. As a teenager, he was a rebellious kid into punk rock and skating. He went to college for photography but didn't take to academics and dropped out.

In his late 20s, Kelso found himself drawn to the church through a woman he was dating. He converted to Christianity in an Anglican church at age 29. The church had a strong focus on racial justice. Kelso had long been fascinated by the civil rights movement. The church played a film featuring the social justice activist Bryan Stephenson. Kelso felt "an interior grace" to do something. In his early 30s, as he shot for Time, Bloomberg and The New York Times, he merged his faith with his work as a photographer. He took his camera on the road to document poverty and racial violence in the South, including a series on neo-Confederates and another on sites where lynching had occurred.

The photography work made him more aware of "the sin of white supremacy," Kelso says. He realized how many people in America were homeless because their ancestors had been first enslaved, then kept off valuable land, then excluded from schools, then prevented from buying homes in neighbourhoods with good jobs, a history of racial injustice that directly impacted contemporary America's poor and unhoused communities.

Homelessness in Atlanta.

By the time Kelso felt a deeper calling to minister to people without homes, he and Jessica were living in Atlanta, one of America's most booming cities, and also one of its most unequal. Atlanta now has a population of around 500,000 and a metro population of over six million. It's a city that's benefited from the tech boom, drawing affluent professionals who buy up new luxury apartments and crowd out the less fortunate.

Between 2010 and 2023, as rents soared, Atlanta lost 60,000 apartments renting for $1,250 or less, according to Brian Goldstone, the author of There Is No Place For Us: Working and Homeless in America, a surprise publishing hit The New York Times picked as one of its 10 best books of 2025. Almost all of the new apartments have been luxury condos. Over 150,000 low-income households now spend over half their earnings on rent, according to Goldstone. Increasingly, people who are working still cannot afford housing. A network of churches and nonprofits has been trying to offer help, but initiatives like Kelso's stand out. Hospitality has always been part of Kelso's personality. Before he found Jesus, when he was in his 20s, hustling to make a living as a professional photographer, his roommates got tired of him inviting people he met to crash at their shared apartment. Kelso became Catholic only a few years ago. "It was when I became Catholic that my thinking about social justice really flourished," he said. In particular, he was inspired by saints, "people who did things differently"—like Dorothy Day, the 20th-century journalist turned Catholic activist whom the Vatican has proclaimed a Servant of God, a stepping stone to sainthood. Another attraction was the church's emphasis on the needy. Pope Leo XIV's first letter, he pointed out, was an eloquent plea to help the poor. "From the moment he entered the world, Jesus knew the bitter experience of rejection," Pope Leo writes. "He presented himself to the world not only as a poor Messiah, but also as the Messiah of and for the poor."

When I visited Kelso, he had Jim Forrest's biography of Day on his living room coffee table. Peter Maurin, Dorothy Day's collaborator, idolized Basil the Great, who in Turkey founded a so-called city of hospitality, where "food, shelter and medical care were provided without charge," according to Forest.

In Maurin's view, every Christian family should set up a "Christ Room" for hospitality inside their home. That's what the Kelsos had in mind a decade or so ago when they invited a woman and her five children to stay with them. They toyed with the idea of building a "Christ House" in their backyard to more easily house people, but they were unable to raise the funds.

Among friends.

I met Kelso on a Sunday morning at St. Thomas More, the Jesuit-led church where he attends Mass with his family. Immediately after church, we hopped in the van and drove over to a motel to pick up Miss Sondra, an unhoused woman in her 50s who suffers from schizophrenia. The Kelsos were hosting a Sunday pizza party for their friends, as they call the people they assist. Many of them can't get rides, so Kelso was making the rounds to pick up people. Kelso roams eastern Atlanta in a 2003 Ford van donated by the day care of a nearby Catholic church, Sts. (Saints) Peter and Paul. In the winter, it doubles as a closet for free clothes. Driving around, Kelso constantly sticks his head out the window.

"Ms. Denise. Do you have a ride? O.K. Love you, Ms. Denise. See ya later." Kelso has a gift for connecting, for forging a bond where none seems to exist.

This night, Miss Sondra had splurged to spend a night at a nearby hotel. Staying at a hotel for a night or two is a frequent move when people receive their government assistance payments. Receptionists often turn up their noses, but they usually take people's money and check them in. Kelso knocked on the motel door. "Who goes there?" he asked in a Shakespearean baritone. Miss Sondra answered. "I'm not feeling good. It could be my glasses." "You got a headache or stomach-ache?" "Stomach-ache." "When was the last time you ate food?" "This morning." "What did you eat? "Bread."

"Here's what I'd like you to do: Come to my house. There's going to be pizza. Salad. Pie. If you just want to rest, you can rest in the bed. It's not good for you to be alone."

"It's not good for me to be alone," she repeated, and hopped in the van. We kept driving and pretty soon the vehicle was filled with more of the friends Kelso's made on the street.

At the party, Kelso's kids ran around his backyard and played as everybody ate pizza and salad.

Blessed with community.

The next day, I saw Miss Sondra carrying her sleeping bag after waking up on a nearby avenue. She had checked out of the hotel and was back on the street. Kelso often finds apartments for people like Miss Sondra, only to see them leave after a couple of nights because they say they miss the camaraderie of the street. “That doesn’t invalidate the love you show them,” he says. Still, it is frustrating, and Kelso knows he’s living on the edge of burnout. “Oh, we’re dog-tired,” he confesses. “But when you open yourself up to community, you’re blessed with community, and every day, but when you serve the poor, it expands your heart because God says when you do it for the poor, you’re doing it for Him.” Kelso tries to practice self-care. Once a year, he takes a week-long retreat. When his oldest son felt ignored, Kelso took him fishing in Alabama.

Before I caught my flight home, Kelso invited me to a secret encampment next to some railroad tracks. First, we stopped at a Dunkin’ and bought a dozen egg sandwiches. “I can’t come empty-handed,” he says. After 15 minutes along railroad tracks, we ducked into the woods and visited Gypsy, a young woman Kelso said was struggling with addiction. She raved about the natural beauty of her encampment.

Next, we met a woman named Michaela who has a history of living with violent partners. Walking back to the car along the train tracks, Kelso called Michaela’s mother. He tries to stay in touch with families. “If Michaela has an overdose or dies out here, who’s going to tell her mom?” he says.

Many of Kelso’s fellow helpers think his work is extreme. “I worry about him,” Lauren Hopper, a nurse who’s worked with Kelso, says. “But Johnathon is so good at finding exactly what the person needs. For example, maybe your glasses are broken, and you can’t read your prescription unless you have glasses.” Kelso also spends a lot of time and budget money from The Porter Gate making sure people have phones. The charity also spends money on meals, toiletries and down payments on apartments. One thing that makes Kelso stand out is his reliability. Homeless people make sure to make their appointments with Johnathon to receive help “because he shows up,” Ms. Hopper says. “Atlanta wouldn’t have any homeless people if it had ten Johnathons.”

Walking back to the van, we ran into a man headed back to his camp. “I’m out of biscuits, all I have is my love,” Kelso says. He took the man’s name, phone and social security numbers, and promised to help him get an apartment. On his missions, Kelso tries to stay practical. His favourite question: “What can I do to help right now?” He doesn’t tell cops, nurses or drug dealers about Jesus unless somebody asks him why he’s doing this. When that happens, he musters impressive eloquence.

By opening his family’s home, “we are making a sacrifice,” he says. “In that sacrifice, there’s this exchange where God gladdens our hearts and teaches us something about holiness, and whatever station God has called you to, it’s about being able to open your heart, so you become a better person.”

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