Red Door doing more to help the poor

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Categories: News
Tags: Diocesan News, Featured
Since the Great Depression, Pittsburgh’s most vulnerable people have lined up outside the social hall of Saint Mary of Mercy Church for a simple lunch to help keep them going. Now, thanks to an expansion of the Red Door ministry, they are being welcomed inside for additional assistance and spiritual support.

The poor and homeless are receiving up to three meals a day, along with clothing and shoes. They can also sign up for subsidized housing through nonprofits that work out of the church basement.

Soon, guests will be able to take warm showers and even wash their clothes, according to Father Chris Donley, pastor of Divine Mercy, the parish that includes Saint Mary of Mercy.

“One man said to me, ‘I can tell you’re forming a community, and you respect me. That’s the only time of the day I feel that way,’” Father Donley said.
Dozens of students from University of Pittsburgh, Carnegie Mellon and Duquesne have been volunteering at the Red Door, said Will Ives, a Catholic campus missionary from FOCUS, who was joined by fellow missionary Mary Kate O’Brien.

Pitt junior Megan Nagy, who spent a recent Thursday morning making sandwiches, called it an “awesome experience. I hope I can come again.”

Elise Smith, whose friends brought her to the Red Door, volunteers two or three times a week. “I come from a strong Catholic family,” she said. “This kind of work is really important to my faith.”

Volunteers had to stay away when the pandemic hit a year ago, so Father Donley jumped in, with help from the Sisters of Merciful Jesus. He partnered with Catholic Charities to set up a warming center, and then brought in housing experts. A grant from Our Campaign for The Church Alive! is helping to pay for upgrades to the dining hall, kitchen and restroom facilities.

Breakfast, lunch and dinner are now served, and guests are welcome to attend daily Mass and adoration, to pray, or watch spiritual films on a large television. In the evening, they return to shelters for the night.

Father Donley credited Bishop David Zubik—who has worked next door to the ministry for decades—with inspiring and encouraging many of the improvements.

“More important than giving a sandwich is giving Christ,” Father Donley said. “We try to fulfill the scriptural call to love the least of these.”

Parents and children are invited to “become a Red Door Family,” collecting items, assembling lunch bags and dropping off non-perishable food and clothing. The Red
Door has also received clothes from sports teams at Pitt, Duquesne and Central Catholic’s hockey team.

“People are very grateful,” Father Donley said. “I have a great love of the poor. Coming up on 10 years as a priest, I feel like this is just the beginning.”

To learn more, visit https://divinemercypgh.org/red-door.

*Father Chris Donley surveys the new warming center below St. Mary of Mercy Church in downtown Pittsburgh.*
March Madness

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Five powerhouse basketball teams in four Catholic high schools in the diocese hope to turn a season of challenges into championships.

The Serra Catholic girls squad (16-0), faces top-seeded Neshannock (16-2) for the Class 2A title Friday at 5 p.m. at North Allegheny. The coaches of both teams are legendary, each having more than 650 career wins. Serra coach Bill Cleary, in his 34th season, is vying for his fifth WPIAL crown. Neshannock is trying to win a second trophy in three years.

For the seventh consecutive season, the North Catholic girls basketball team is playing in the WPIAL final, and they’ve done it across three classifications. This year the Trojanettes (18-2) will play in the Class 3A title game against defending champs Mohawk (16-4) at 5 p.m. Saturday at North Allegheny.

Boys
Top-seeded Bishop Canevin (15-5) tips off against No. 2 Rochester (14-4) in the Class 1A championship game at 8 p.m. Friday at North Allegheny, hoping to take home their first WPIAL hoops trophy.

The Crusaders are making their first title game appearance in 15 years, but the odds are longer for Rochester. Last year, they didn’t win a single game. The season before, they won one game. In 2021, first-year coach Sean Keaton has led the Rams to the second seed.

Our Lady of Sacred Heart puts its 20-0 record on the line against Greensburg Central Catholic (16-3) at 5 p.m. Saturday at Peters Township in Class 2A. The two-time defending champion Chargers are appearing in the WPIAL title game for the fifth straight season. It’s GCC’s first appearance since 2014.

The final WPIAL championship game involving a Catholic team from the diocese features North Catholic (18-4) vs. Lincoln Park (17-5) in Class 4A at 8 p.m. Monday at North Allegheny. It’s an exciting rematch. Lincoln Park beat North Catholic in the title game in 2019, and the Trojans returned the favor last year.
Take 5 with Father Levi

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Father Levi Hartle is parochial vicar at Blessed Trinity Parish in south Pittsburgh and diocesan Praise and Worship consultant. He was ordained in 2015.

1. **How did God call you to the priesthood?**

When I was in the seventh and eighth grades, a few people asked me if I had ever considered becoming a priest. I hadn't thought about it, but their questions made me wonder if they saw something in me that I did not see in myself. I was active in my church and in my Catholic school, and began to pray about a call to the priesthood.

My cousin said that if I was called to the priesthood, God would make it clear. During my senior year of high school, I was on a retreat at St. Paul of the Cross Monastery on the South Side when a man I didn't know called me by name and recounted to me some early childhood memories that he could not have known if not for some supernatural grace. The last thing the man said was, “God is calling you to the priesthood.” Then, I felt this overwhelming sense of God love and peace.
Afterward, I went to my room and sat on my bed in the retreat center and I felt like God the Father was holding me in His arms. I prayed: *If priesthood is what you have made me for, then my answer is yes.* I went to Grove City College for my undergraduate degree in music education and entered St. Paul Seminary afterwards

2. What is the most meaningful aspect of your ministry?

It’s praising the Lord and bringing other people into that praise. Praise teaches people how to unite their hearts with God’s. The height of praise is the Mass, and Confession removes people’s obstacles to praise. I love to evangelize through music, particularly praise music. I sing and play the guitar, the trumpet, and the piano. I love to help people who love Jesus to fall in love with Jesus! St. Francis said: “I want to be a psalm to the Lord.” The Lord told me in prayer that He wants me to be the same. Every beat of our hearts and every one of our actions is part of a song of praise to God.

3. What is the most challenging part of your ministry?

For me personally, it can be that I overextend myself at times. The pandemic has also brought new challenges. Because of social distancing rules, I can’t sit with people who are struggling and talk with them the way that I used to. COVID has really crushed that kind of human contact. But **Praise Nation**, a diocesan worship initiative that I helped to found, has released many praise and worship videos on **YouTube**, and will soon be releasing a number of EP recordings across social media platforms. Our hope is that when people connect to their faith through a video on their TV or hear these Catholic songs of praise, their hearts and minds will be redirected to Jesus and His Church.

4. What do you wish people knew about the priesthood?
I don’t think that most people understand that priests are human too and need to be loved. Small acts of kindness go a long way. This can even be as simple as looking your priest in the eye and saying hello.

For men discerning the priesthood, I wish they knew that everything you give to the Lord, He always gives back. If God made you for this vocation, it will fit like a glove. Priesthood is really hard and really beautiful at the same time. It is a gift of yourself. You need to die to your ego and embrace the cross. Priesthood is much like a marriage in that way. That is countercultural today; everyone is looking for the resurrection without the cross. But the only way to resurrected life with Christ is through the cross.

5. What is your hobby, or what do you like to do in your free time?

I like to play sports like ultimate frisbee, tennis, volleyball, and ping pong. Praising the Lord is my passion and I love doing that by playing music. I’m a people person and relax best when I’m surrounded by friends and family.
https://youtube.com/watch?v=z7R6TMu8ZP8
Get inspired: Young people connected with Christ

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One Catholic elementary school student harvests vegetables for the hungry. Another helps prepare her church for Mass. A third student gets up early to serve at daily Mass before school starts, while another prays to God for His protection and mercy.

All say they are excited about their faith as they try to learn, love and live Jesus in the classroom, at home and in their parishes.

**Justin Peoples** is a busy young man. Every summer he weeds the garden at Saint John Neumann Parish in Franklin Park, and brings vegetables to the Little Sisters of the Poor who feed those in need. The seventh grade student at Blessed Francis Seelos Academy in Wexford is an altar server, plays the trumpet during school Masses at Saint Aidan Parish, and volunteers at fish fries and festivals.

Justin also attends his parish middle school faith enrichment program, called Ignite. Kids discuss ways to stay active in the faith and grow closer to God, studying the
Bible and going to adoration.

“One hundred years from now, people won't care if I played a certain sport,” said Justin, who happens to be a cross-country champion. “I'm focused on doing things that help me get to heaven.”

Abby Opferman helps her father Dan, who is the sacristan at Saint Angela Merici Church, part of Mary, Mother of God Parish. They prepare the church for Masses, including funerals and special liturgies. The seventh grader at Mary of Nazareth School in White Oak also has been an altar server for three years, and helps to train new servers.

“I wanted to be involved in the Mass,” she said.

Abby has an active prayer life. “I try to pray every night before going to bed, thanking God for the day he's given me, and in the morning for the day ahead,” she said. Her family of eight also prays the Rosary together in May as a devotion to Mary.

Luke Jesso, an eighth grade student at Ave Maria Academy’s Mt. Lebanon campus, has been an altar server once a week for the last two years, serving 7 a.m. Mass at Saint Bernard Church, part of Saint Michael the Archangel Parish.
“God gives me everything, and I think that I should thank him for everything,” Luke said. “Serving at Mass, I see how beautiful the Mass really is. It helps me grow closer to God.”

Luke also works the parish fish fry at Our Lady of Grace Church, running food out to cars this Lent. All tips are donated to the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul. “Father gave a homily about how gifted we are, and that inspired everyone to give back to people who are in need,” he said.

Emaya Green, one of seven children in her family who attend Mass at Saint Bede Church in Point Breeze, is learning about the faith as a fifth grade student at Sister Thea Bowman Catholic Academy in Wilkinsburg. She wants to be an altar server like her big sister Maurisa. The pandemic interrupted those plans but she hopes to be trained this year.

Emaya has been learning about the Bible in school and God’s mercy. She prays regularly.

“Sometimes I pray for my family and people who are sick,” she said. “I know he hears my prayers, and God will always protect me and forgive me.”
Bishop Canevin alum thankful for students’ gift

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Bishop Canevin High School students didn’t know alumna Becca McKim Barrett, but that didn’t matter. She had serious health problems, and so did her youngest son. That was enough.

When word came that the 1994 Canevin graduate needed a motorized wheelchair, students donated money for two “dress down” days, raising $2,000. That was just the beginning.

“When our parents got word as to why we were having a dress down day and were really moved by the students’ response, they issued a challenge,” principal Michael Joyce said. “One parent offered a $500 match, and along with other alumni, they raised an additional $3,000.”

The funds paid for the wheelchair and will be used for other medical expenses.
A mother of four and a grandmother, Barrett was diagnosed with lupus in 2009. Her youngest son, who has autism and Tourette syndrome, wasn’t doing well. A few years later, he was hit by a car, causing a traumatic brain injury. In 2017, doctors found four inoperable tumors on Barrett’s spine, and she’s been confined to her home. The wheelchair means freedom.

“There are not adequate words to convey my gratitude,” Barrett told her alma mater. “There’s always been something special about Canevin and I’m so glad to see that hasn’t changed.”

Two seniors spoke about why students answered the call.

“She was one of us, a student here,” said Nevan Crossey, student government president. “Once a Crusader, always a Crusader.”

Classmate Erin Egan added, “We’re always reminded to be a person for others, and it’s needed now especially with the pandemic.”

Crossey and Egan are winners of Bishop Canevin’s AMDG award, the letters taken from the Jesuit motto, *Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam*, “all things for God's greater glory.” The award is given for excellence in academics, in service to others, and in demonstrating the school’s dedication to the Ignation tradition.

“The example of these students, all the student body, our faculty, staff, parents and alumni, is a wonderful demonstration of what Catholic schools mean to the community,” Joyce said. “Even in this pandemic, we have continued to live our mission and challenge the students.”
Margi Henderson remembers a man who came to her food pantry for assistance. “I used to donate here, but now I need help,” he told Henderson, the director of the Saint Winifred Food Pantry in Mt. Lebanon. He had lost his job and had a family to feed.

It’s a scene being replayed across the country since the pandemic began. The number of Americans experiencing hunger and food insecurity has grown from 35 million in 2019 to more than 50 million last year, according to the advocacy group Feeding America.

The Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank last October projected a 42 percent increase in food insecurity rates in the region.

“Our neighbors are hurting, and we must act now,” said Sister Janet Gardner of the Sisters of Saint Francis of the Providence of God. Sister Janet co-chairs the Catholic
Sisters Leadership Council of western Pennsylvania, which is joining a national challenge by the Leadership Conference of Women Religious to fight hunger during Catholic Sisters Week, which is March 8-14, 2021.

For nearly a decade, her congregation has sponsored a Thanksgiving food drive at the Saint Winifred pantry. “My first year here, they showed up at the door with so much food,” Henderson said. “It was so wonderful, I cried.”

Now the sisters are inviting others to help them restock the pantry for the spring, collecting canned goods, nonperishable food items, personal hygiene products, toiletries and grocery store gift cards.

Other congregations will be busy as well. The Sisters of the Humility of Mary are donating their stimulus checks to several organizations that distribute food. They’re also ramping up food production at their 300-acre farm in Villa Maria, Lawrence County. Half their produce is sent to local food banks, shelters and parishes.

The Sisters of Saint Joseph of Baden will continue to donate produce grown in their three congregational gardens. Over the past eight years, the Sisters have given away 14,319 pounds of vegetables to area food banks and soup kitchens. They also raise chickens, which contributed 320 dozen eggs to the cause.
The School Sisters of Saint Francis in West View are planning a food drive, requesting nonperishable food items, gift cards and funds for local families in need. The Sisters of Mercy in Pittsburgh will be making sandwiches for area homeless shelters and contribute financially to the Food Insecurity Program for students at Carlow University.

At La Roche University, the Sisters of Divine Providence, who hold a food drive every year during Catholic Sisters Week, will donate goods to the North Hills Community Outreach and their Providence Food Pantry.

“Each of us can collect food donations, create community gardens and contact elected leaders to ask them to work together to help our neighbors in need,” Sister Janet said.

And good news for that food pantry donor-turned-recipient. He has returned to work.

*To learn more on how help the Sisters, visit [https://www.sistersofwpa.org/meeting-the-challenge](https://www.sistersofwpa.org/meeting-the-challenge).*

Felician Sister Mary Francine Horos assists students in the pantry at Our Lady of the Sacred Heart High School in Coraopolis. The Felicians are donating $1,000 each to 19 different food pantries nationwide. *(file photo)*