Amen to Action hopes to make a million meals

One of Pittsburgh’s newest Thanksgiving traditions found a way to continue during the pandemic, even though thousands of people were unable to gather in the David L. Lawrence Convention Center the day after Thanksgiving to package one million meals for the hungry in southwestern Pennsylvania.

Thanks to a pilot program, 10 churches will host events on weekends in November to each pack 100,000 meals. Sign-ups for volunteers – which are limited due to social distancing – are available at www.AmenToAction.org.

“Amen to Action is a mission that Jesus gave us – to act together as sisters and brothers of Jesus as we seek to serve the poor in His name,” said Bishop David Zubik. “What a privilege it is for all who participate in this special initiative to reflect
the mercy of Jesus and our love for one another. Participating in Amen to Action is a God-given opportunity to do so.”

Amen to Action is an outgrowth of a series of conversations that Bishop Zubik hosted with ecumenical leader Reid Carpenter, bringing together diverse Christian leaders ranging from Catholic and Baptist to Eastern Orthodox to Pentecostal.

For three years starting in 2017, thousands of volunteers from throughout the region packed the convention center to put together non-perishable meals for the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank. Then COVID struck.

With large gatherings out, Cindy Deschaine, pastoral associate for the Beaver Valley parishes of the Great Grouping (Good Samaritan, Ambridge; St. John the Baptist, Baden; Our Lady of Peace, Conway; Saints John & Paul in Wexford), decided to try smaller, socially-distanced event.

“I didn’t realize what I was getting into,” said Deschaine, who is a coach for this year’s host churches. But the 2020 event, held in the former Quigley Catholic High School, has become a national model for socially distanced food packaging. Volunteers repackage bulk-dried ingredients—such as beans, oatmeal and pasta—into individual servings.

Because Amen to Action is ecumenical, Deschaine reached out to churches of all traditions. She found people eager to volunteer.

“This was everyone’s chance to get out and do something for the greater good. It was a lot of fun,” she said.

Sign-ups for November are filling rapidly.
“The response to Amen to Action by the Catholic Diocese of Pittsburgh has been inspiring,” said Lee Kricher, president of the Pittsburgh Leadership Foundation, which sponsors Amen to Action. As of mid-September, “our three Catholic sites have the highest number of volunteer sign-ups.”

The goal is 225 sign-ups at each. As of last week, Saint Catherine Laboure Parish’s Saint Joan of Arc Church in South Park topped the list with 163.

At North Catholic High School in Cranberry, principal Michael Palcsey expected students to use it for service hours, so that “we will fill the quota pretty quick.”

At Saint Jude Parish in the East End, where the Sacred Heart Activities Center will host the closing event on the day after Thanksgiving, sign-ups are nearly full. Its predecessor parishes, Sacred Heart and Saint Raphael, have been enthusiastic participants since they first sent charter buses to the event in 2018.

Amen to Action embodies key points from a mission statement that the parish is crafting on service to the poor and marginalized, said Father Joe Mele, the pastor.

“The good people of Saint Jude are extremely generous,” he said. “They want their mission to be more than a plaque that hangs on the wall. Amen is one of the ways that they live that out. It’s also an event that brings us together as a community, and brings us together with our neighbors from other churches.”
TO REGISTER: www.AmenToAction.org

SITES:

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 6 (8:30 AM – 12:00 PM) Crossroads Church (PGH West) | 1000 Crossroads Drive, Oakdale, PA 15071 (SOUTH)
Christ Church at Grove Farm | 249 Duff Road, Sewickley, PA 15143 (NORTH/WEST)
North Catholic High School | 1617 Route 228, Cranberry Township, PA 16066 (NORTH)

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 13 (8:30 AM – 12:00 PM) Mt Ararat Baptist Church | 271 Paulson Ave., Pittsburgh, PA 15206 (CENTRAL/EAST)
Orchard Hill Church | 2551 Brandt School Rd., Wexford, PA 15090 (NORTH)
Amplify Church | 9400 Saltsburg Rd., Pittsburgh, PA 15239 (EAST)

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 20 (8:30 AM – 12:00 PM) St. Joan of Arc Church | 6470 Library Rd., South Park, PA 15129 (SOUTH)
First Presbyterian Church Beaver | 252 College Avenue, Beaver, PA 15009 (WEST)
Allison Park Church | 2326 Duncan Ave., Allison Park, PA 15101 (NORTH)
FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 26 (8:30 AM – 12:00 PM) **Sacred Heart Church | 310 Shady Ave., Pittsburgh, PA 15206 (CENTRAL/EAST)**
The 56th Annual Peru Mission Dinner to assist the life-saving ministry of the diocese’s medical missionaries in Chimbote, Peru, has shifted to a virtual event for the second year.

The change from an in-person dinner was made to protect attendees from the risks of COVID-19, according to Dolores Nypaver, diocesan director of Stewardship. It will be held online at 6 p.m. on Thurs. Oct. 7 at www.ChimboteFoundation.org. A recording will be made for donors who wish to view the event later.

Speakers will provide an update on how the Covid-19 pandemic has devastated the country and limited medical services in Chimbote.

Peru has the highest COVID-19 mortality per capita in the world. The government said in May there have been 5,484 deaths per one million inhabitants. Peru has a population of about 33 million people.
Video presentations on Oct. 7 will include accounts from Dominican Sisters Margaret Mary Birchmeier and Lillian Bockheim, who co-founded the Center for Social Works in Chimbote with the late Msgr. Jules Roos in 1966. Bishop David Zubik will offer special remarks.

WTAE-TV’s Mike Clark, a longtime friend of Chimbote, once again will serve as master of ceremonies.

Nypaver said last year’s virtual dinner was a big success, and asks supporters to again consider donating to help during these difficult times.

Ongoing financial support from Chimbote Foundation allowed key medical services to continue to be provided in a new clinic, Posta Medica, serving patients from Chimbote and surrounding areas.

The event is one of the primary means of support for the Center for Social Works, which consists of a maternity hospital, outpatient clinic, clinical laboratory, pharmacy and home for abandoned children. It also sponsors a home-visit program aiding the “poorest of the poor.”

More information can be found at www.ChimboteFoundation.org, by emailing chimbote@diopitt.org or calling 412-456-3085.
Inheriting traits from Jesus

SEPTEMBER 24, 2021

Categories: Columns
Tags: Bridging the Gap, Featured

Bridging the Gap: I have become Jesus

It is my guess that somewhere along the line in each of our lives we have received an unusual gift, something that we never expected nor even wanted.

Several years ago at Christmas, my dear goddaughter from Florida gave me one of those ancestry test kits that have become so popular. Not only did Carla help me unwrap the kit. Not only did she help me follow the instructions. But she assisted me in sending back all the particulars to the company that does the genetic analysis. Within three weeks, the results arrived. Not many surprises, for sure. My ancestors came from Eastern Europe. But an interesting gift. And an interesting experience.

Long before those DNA kits became a fad, isn’t it often true that we have the tendency to make observations about each other’s inherited traits, especially from our parents.
The most obvious are the physical resemblances. In my case, I have very definitely inherited my dad’s curly hair, his height, and his prolonged nose. From my mom, I have inherited facial dimples, brown eyes and moderately fair skin.

But beyond our physical traits, without our realizing it, we inherit behavioral similarities. I’m sure that you have seen those mugs or tee shirts that carry the message: “I have become my mother” or “I have become my father.”

From my mom, I have inherited an appreciation of cold temperatures. For her, it could never get too cold. She was famous for turning down the thermostat in both winter and summer. To the dismay of my coworkers over the years, I have inherited that particular trait!

Likewise, my dad had a habit of washing our family car as many as four times a week. He would often say: “Dave, doesn’t it seem like the car rides better when it’s clean?” And guess what! I have inherited that very same trait.

But more important than any of our particular family traits, physical or behavioral, are the traits that we inherit from our relationship with Jesus.

Not so long ago at Sunday Mass, we heard a Gospel in which Jesus gathered together his closest cronies, the Apostles, and asked them a very pointed question: “Who do people say that I am?”

The Apostles offered lots of different responses: “Some say You’re one of the prophets, some say You’re John the Baptist...” And then Jesus posed the more direct question: “And who do you say that I am?”

Following some uncomfortable silence, Peter responded: “You are the Christ.”
While he was absolutely correct in his leap of faith, Peter had great difficulty in coming to understand what it would mean for Jesus to be the Christ. He would have to suffer. He would have to die before He could rise again. When Peter heard Jesus describe Himself as the Christ, he objected.

As I reflect on that Gospel encounter and maybe as you do too, it is important for us to consider how we might have responded to Jesus’ question if we were in the company of the Apostles. That question has everything to do with our individual lives as Christians and with our life as God’s family, the Church.

So much of what we have been doing throughout On Mission for The Church Alive! has had as its purpose that we come to KNOW Jesus better—not just to KNOW ABOUT Him.

But that isn’t enough. It isn’t enough for us to know about Jesus. It isn’t even enough for us to know Jesus. It wasn’t enough for Peter or any of the Apostles. What Jesus wanted was for them to become more like Him. As it was with them, so it is true for us. We need to know about Jesus. We need to know Jesus. But, it is especially important for us to become more like Jesus.

Isn’t that ultimately what Jesus wants from each of us? Think back to February 17 of this year, 2021. It was Ash Wednesday. The Gospel that the Church chooses for us as we begin that holy season is the one where Jesus reminds us that we are called to be people who invest in prayer, fasting AND good works. That’s a charge that we must fully consider not only in Lent but throughout our lives.

Prayer helps to connect us to God, heart to heart.

Fasting helps us to make space for God in our thoughts, in our hearts and in our lives.
But it is our good words and works that show Jesus to the world.

When all is said and done, that’s what our ancestry from Jesus is all about! It is about being like Him, doing what He did, showing His face to the world.

A little earlier in this reflection, I made reference to mugs and tee shirts that have the message: “I have become my mother” or “I have become my father.”

Allow me to suggest a more important one. The goal for your life and mine, if we are serious about being disciples of Jesus, is to be able to say: “I have become Jesus.”

Photo by Justin Merriman
Pregnant women in need find a community in Genesis of Pittsburgh

SEPTEMBER 24, 2021

Categories: News
Tags: Diocesan News, Featured
Sarah was working in shipping and raising her four-year old daughter when she became pregnant at the start of the pandemic. She had to quit her job due to health issues, and not having the resources to support her new baby, she turned to Genesis of Pittsburgh.

The pro-life nonprofit offers supplies, childbirth and parenting courses, housing and emotional support for pregnant women and families in need. In the Pittsburgh region since 1983, it receives help from many groups, including Catholic parishes.

Genesis provided Sarah with clothing, shoes, diapers and a car seat, but just as importantly, a connection to a caring community.

When the pandemic hit, Genesis’ Learning Center classes went online. Instructors teach pregnant women and their partners the basics of childbirth and parenting. By attending class they can earn “baby bucks” for items like strollers and car seats.
These Zoom calls became a source of consolation and camaraderie in Sarah’s life. They gave her someone to talk to when much of the world had closed down. She knew that a friendly voice was only a phone call away.

“It’s okay to ask for help,” she said. “I’ve felt alone, I’ve felt helpless. But it gets better with time.”

She also appreciated that Genesis encouraged mothers to not lose sight of caring for themselves as they cared for their children. Genesis partners with local clothing stores for “Dress for Success” events that gave Sarah a wardrobe refresh and a confidence boost.

Genesis offers a host of services to pregnant women and families in need. In alignment with COVID protocols, up to four women who are homeless and pregnant can live at Genesis House during their pregnancy. Staff help them to secure housing for after their child is born, and to either find employment or finish their GED, said Crystal Turner, Genesis executive director.

Adoption services are available to women seeking to place their child in an adoptive family. Genesis also has a Grandfamily program that gives grandparents who are raising their grandchildren and single parents in need access to clothes and school supplies for children up to age 18.
“From the time women find out they are pregnant to the day their child graduates from high school, we are here for them,” Turner said.

Nine parishes around the diocese have taken Genesis under their wing. Every October, bassinetttes are placed in the vestibule at Saint Mary of the Assumption Church for people to donate new baby items.

Terri Sirianni of Our Lady of Perpetual Help Parish coordinates the Grandfamily program and facilitates her parish’s outreach to Genesis. Through their “Baby Bottle Bank” collections, parishioners take an empty baby bottle home to fill with monetary donations for Genesis.

Sirianni says her parish stands in staunch support of Genesis’ mission.

“Genesis offers services that help people while allowing them to maintain their dignity,” she said.

The Senior Connection group at Saints John and Paul Parish, which serves low-income seniors and area agencies, helps Genesis with groundskeeping and interior improvements. They have power washed and stained the deck at the house where the women live, sanded and repainted outdoor tables and chairs, and beautified the grounds with flowers donated from Soergel Orchards.

This fall, they will repair uneven concrete at Genesis and install blinds inside the house. Parishioners hope these improvements help women to feel at ease in their surroundings.

“We really want the women to have a sense of comfort and relief. We want them to feel like they are home,” said Carol Horvatin, Senior Connection member.
Sarah’s son was born in December and she now has two beautiful children. She wants struggling pregnant women to know that they are not alone.

“There is help. There are good people out there,” she said. “We need more organizations like this. There is hope for people who feel alone, scared, and hopeless.”

Genesis has centers in Allegheny and Washington counties. For more information about Genesis of Pittsburgh or to find out how your parish can support its mission, visit www.genesispgh.org.
A stack of Mary Lou Williams LPs by the turntable meant something in the 1950s and ‘60s. It indicated the owner was not just a jazz fan, but rather a listener of some refinement.

Williams was known as the “first lady of the piano,” a woman of unparalleled achievement in the macho world of jazz players.

She won fame first in Pittsburgh. A prodigy at age six, she was known locally as “the little piano girl of East Liberty.” At 12 she was touring. A year later, in the early 1920s, she was playing for the legendary Duke Ellington. She later arranged music for Earl Hines, Benny Goodman, and Tommy Dorsey.

She performed with just about every major jazz star of her era, and she led her own trio, quartet, quintet, sextet and orchestra. She gave piano lessons to Thelonious
Monk and Bud Powell and mentored many other greats.

It’s arguable, though, that she has never been more famous than now, forty years after her death. The revival of interest in Williams’ music is worldwide, but Pittsburgh is certainly an epicenter.

In the city she’s the subject of several public murals, notably on the East Busway. In a display at the airport her face appears with those of fellow Pittsburgh icons Andy Warhol and Fred Rogers. Her piano is on permanent exhibit at the Heinz History Center.

And a new biography has appeared this fall. *Mary Lou Williams: Music for the Soul* is the latest installment in the prestigious People of God series from Liturgical Press. Written by Greenfield resident Deanna Witkowski, herself a jazz composer, *Music for the Soul* is the third major biography of Williams since 1999. It is the first, however, to emphasize the importance of her spiritual vision — her Catholic faith.

In 1953-54 Williams was living and working in Paris, France, which had become a refuge for African-American artists and writers. Always a seeker, she began to pray in earnest. A Catholic friend introduced her to his favorite place to meditate, a small church with a fenced-in garden. Williams later told friends that she had a vision of the Virgin Mary there.
When she returned to the States in 1954, she took up residence in Manhattan. She started attending daily Mass.

In 1956 she was received into the Catholic Church. At first she thought she would give up performance. It seemed to involve her in a world of vanity, rivalry, and drug use. But she realized, after some time away from the stage, that while at the keyboard she could be “praying through fingertips.”

She sensed that God was calling her to compose sacred music in the jazz idiom. She floated the idea to several churchmen, who strongly discouraged her. Pittsburgh Bishop John Wright was at first skeptical, but gradually won over. Eventually he invited her to return to Pittsburgh and teach music at Seton High School in Brookline.

In time she would release several albums of sacred music: *Black Christ of the Andes* (1964), a jazz hymn to Saint Martin de Porres, and *Music for Peace* (1970), a suite of songs inspired by the Catholic liturgy. With the Paul Quinlan Trio she wrote and played for the album *Praise the Lord in Many Voices* (1966). She would eventually compose several different jazz settings for the Mass.

In weeks to come, locals will have several opportunities to hear Williams’ music performed live.

On Sunday, October 17, at 6 p.m., the Deanna Witkowski Trio will play her music at City of Asylum, 40 W. North Ave on North Side.

On Saturday, October 23, at 7 p.m., Saint Benedict the Moor Church will host a special program, “How to Listen to Mary Lou’s Mass,” again featuring Witkowski’s trio.
The following evening, Sunday, October 24, Sacred Heart Church will be the site for a 7 p.m. performance of music from *Music for Peace* (also known as “Mary Lou’s Mass”) and other sacred music by Williams. For that show Witkowski will lead a twelve-voice choir and jazz quartet. Reservations are suggested and can be placed online at saintjudepgh.org or by phone at 412-661-0187. Tickets may also be purchased at the door.
https://youtube.com/watch?v=J80ysXQJ4yA
By Jennifer Antkowiak

A recent conversation with some of my friends revealed that most of them felt both busy and frustrated, because they never seemed to be able to get enough done.

I encouraged my friends to name some of things that they did accomplish in a typical day. The standard response was a long list that included things like, “Got up and dressed. Fed the dog. Made sure the kids were up for school. Made sure they had everything they needed for the day. Packed lunches for everyone. Went to work. Scheduled appointments or ran an errand during a lunch break. Stopped at the grocery store on the way home from work. Made dinner. Checked homework. Switched laundry. Went over the family and personal calendars. Gathered everything needed for the next day. Fell asleep reading or watching a show.”

Friends who are caregivers for sick or elderly family members added even more to their daily list.

Still, they felt unproductive and unfulfilled and unmotivated.
They were so deep in the heaviness of their routines that they couldn’t see or celebrate the many good things they were doing.

This was an issue of both unreasonable expectations and of focusing on projects instead of people. They were all wrapped up in the “what” instead of giving attention to the “who” and the “why.”

We tend to set high and unrealistic expectations for ourselves, and when we fall short, we feel like failures. We also tend to project expectations on those around us–our spouses, our children, our co-workers, and others. All too often, we don’t communicate these expectations. So, we’re holding people responsible for things we don’t tell them about, and then we get frustrated when they don’t deliver.

God can help us break these cycles. He makes it very clear that He has one expectation of us: to live as His disciple—to follow Him. Placing false expectations on ourselves and others, comparing ourselves to others, and over-committing ourselves — all of these distract us from our true mission.

If we truly believe that God has given us all that we need to carry out His plan for us, it makes absolutely no sense to compare ourselves to others. God has set each one of us up for success on the path to eternal life with Him by giving us everything we need on our journey as His disciple.

Keeping our attention on Him helps us realize that the only person we have to please is Him. How quickly could we pare down our daily routines if we looked at each activity and asked, “Does doing this thing help me to make Jesus the priority in my life?”

One reason that it’s so hard to let go of the distractions and the temptations is that we allow our identities to be defined by what we do instead of who we are—
beloved children of God. He wants to work through us, in us, and with us, bringing us and those around us closer to Him. It is in that loving relationship with God and our neighbors that we find great joy.

When our identity is anchored in God, our daily tasks and events flow from that relationship. We’re able to feel a sense of accomplishment because we know that what we do has eternal value. Not only are we following His path, but He is walking with us. We realize that God knows us. He made us! He knows we’re not perfect and He loves us anyway. Feeling that divine love can help us manage the expectations we place on ourselves and others.

Let’s all pray for release from the pressures of false expectations.

Dear Lord,

Please help me to trust in your plan for me. Help me to release false expectations and stay focused on you. Allow me to feel the peace that comes from believing that You will make sure I have all that I need to fulfill Your purpose. Help me to project that peace to those around me, so that others may feel Your love through my presence.

Amen.