

Celebrating Lay Apostolate History

in the Diocese of Pittsburgh

Gathered Fragments - Special Feature - 2017

REVITALIZING PARISHES THROUGH EFFECTIVE MINISTRIES

Holly Joy McIlwain

Early on the morning of Saturday, June 17, 2017, more than eighty leaders of Lay Apostolates from throughout the Diocese of Pittsburgh gathered to pray the liturgy and bring the words of the first reading, 2 Corinthians 5:14-21 into reality: "For Christ's love compels us...those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again." Leaders of Lay Apostolates are coming together, more and more, to support each other and grow ministry opportunities because "revitalizing parishes through effective ministries" aren't just words to the *On Mission for the Church Alive!* prayer, they are truly the clarion call for missionary disciples of our Lord. Leaders prayed and listened as Very Rev. Joseph M. Mele, Episcopal Vicar for Leadership Development and Evangelization, implored them to remember this: "The better we develop together as servant leaders with the Heart of Christ, the more we will lead them to encounter Christ." Encountering Christ is at the heart of the resurgence of gatherings of leaders of Lay Apostolates in the Diocese of Pittsburgh. As *On Mission for the Church Alive!* drives us all deeper into prayer and further into outreach, leaders of Lay Apostolates are responding to the rallying cry of our Bishop: "Be a friend. Be a friend of Jesus. Make friends for Jesus."

Throughout the morning, leaders were asked to share stories and moments of conversion, transformation, and mercy which stand out in their ministry experiences. As the room filled with laughter, and some tears, the presence of Christ and the joy of the Gospel were present. Leaders were asked to join together in a one-month period of discernment as the Secretariat hopes to charter a central leadership team serving all Lay Apostolates. Leaders are taking very seriously the words of Saint Paul to the Corinthians, "We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us" (v. 20). The potential for leadership is everywhere, and

being *On Mission for the Church Alive!* calls us to step forward and invite others to join us.

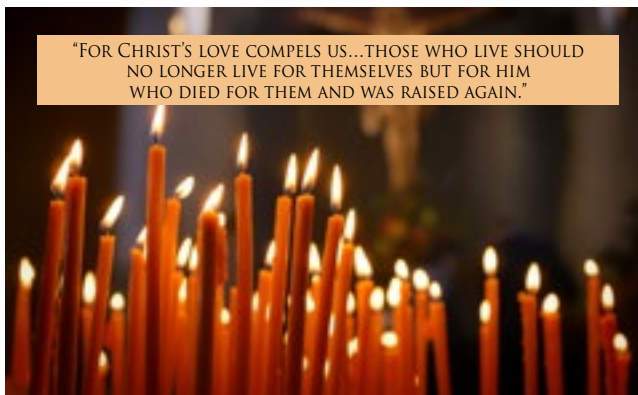
Just a month later, these leaders gathered again, in prayer and discernment about the needs and opportunities existing in our local Church. Remarkably, the network is building up strong relationships spanning vastly different groups such as the Catholic Medical Association, *Pax Christi*, and the Ladies of Claver, which are actively engaging with evangelization groups like Emmaus and *Cursillo*. These kinds of relationships are important as the Diocese of Pittsburgh embarks on a new chapter, as *On Mission for the Church Alive!* is creating opportunities for lay organizations, apostolates, and movements to bring the vision of Bishop Zubik into reality as lay men and women take seriously their call to faith and offer themselves as ambassadors for Christ.

A Lay Apostolate is composed of laypeople and consecrated religious who exercise a ministry within the Catholic Church. These organizations cooperate with ecclesiastical authorities. They operate "under direction of her pastors" but are not members of the official Church hierarchy nor in Holy Orders. Some examples are the Ladies of Charity and the Holy Name Society. The Secretariat for Leadership Development and Evangelization of the Diocese of Pittsburgh exists to serve both clergy and laity. It is our belief that Lay Apostolates contribute greatly to the Church Alive!

Organizing the network of Lay Apostolates is an important part of the work of the Secretariat for Leadership Development and Evangelization. As calling forth a Central Leadership Team of some of these leaders and acting in representation and service to the network takes shape, members of the team will consider the best ways to meet the current needs of the Lay Apostolates in conjunction with the diocesan vision for evangelization. Identifying a framework for vetting and growing membership in Lay Apostolates allows for every parish, every pastor, and every member of the Church of Pittsburgh to have access to concrete ways to practice the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy through these apostolates.

Through the guidance of the Vicar for Leadership Development and Evangelization, Very Reverend Joseph M. Mele, and the vision of Director of Evangelization, Dr. Michel Therrien, and leaders of Lay Apostolates – in collaboration with the network and Central Leadership Team – new horizons in the Diocese of Pittsburgh will become one of the most exciting parts of *On Mission for the Church Alive!* I can't wait for you to meet the good and faithful people who are stewarding their gifts for the sake of Christ.

"FOR CHRIST'S LOVE COMPELS US...THOSE WHO LIVE SHOULD NO LONGER LIVE FOR THEMSELVES BUT FOR HIM WHO DIED FOR THEM AND WAS RAISED AGAIN."



LAY APOSTOLATES SERVE THE CHURCH OF PITTSBURGH WITH A LIVING FAITH

Sharon Camino Serratore

THE CHRIST CHILD SOCIETY OF PITTSBURGH

From its name, one might think that the Christ Child Society of Pittsburgh is mostly active with its projects and services at Christmastime – yet nothing could be further than the reality. There is no season, no time when this lay apostolate is not busy serving children in need – collecting, packaging, delivering and freely giving clothing, winter coats, school and infant supplies. The Society's motto is "Nothing is ever too much to do for a child" and the members live it each day.

With five key ongoing projects, along with proceeds earned from an annual fundraiser, Society members personally serve underprivileged children and youth in a mission that "honors the childhood of Jesus. "We serve him," says Dottie Talarico, the Society's president. "There's something to do every day – to do, to serve, to work."

It's just recently that the Society began in Pittsburgh. Originally formed in 1887 in Washington DC, it wasn't until 1992 that the Christ Child Society began its good works in the Diocese of



Pittsburgh. That year newcomer Judy Fahey moved from Columbus to Pittsburgh and found that no local chapter was in place in her new home city. She promptly worked to start one, by enlisting 25 of her new friends and acquaintances to charter the Pittsburgh chapter of the Society. In 1993, then-Bishop Donald Wuerl gave diocesan approval to the apostolate and today the Pittsburgh group is one of 44 across the nation.

There are 48 active members (many original) in our local chapter who gather each month in a former classroom of All Saints School in Etna, to plan and coordinate projects, and also sort the children's items for distribution. New items are either donated or purchased with the proceeds from the Society's annual fall gala.

Projects include the National Society's signature Layette Program, which provides kits of baby items for newborns. Members gather new baby clothing, bottles and other infant care supplies, and package them in individual cloth bags decorated with the Society's Christ Child emblem. The children's classic Good Night Moon

is also included in each layette. The bags are then delivered to various social service agencies and hospitals. By now, over 4,000 layettes have been distributed to Pittsburgh-area mothers and fathers for their newborns. The program is an essential work of each of the charter groups, says Ms. Talarico, and is nearly as old as the 1887 founding of the Christ Child Society itself.



Since 1994 the Angel's Closet program has been the Society's work to provide new winter coats, hats and gloves to children in need. Over 6,000 coats have been given out. Unlike the layettes which are delivered, the outerwear and accessories are offered

in a shopping "store"-type atmosphere at the All Saints site. "The children are very excited," says Ms. Talarico. "They know it's going to be something new." Children may choose coats for themselves, after trying them on for color and size. Matching hats and gloves complete the package.

The My Stuff bags are backpacks that contain new pajamas, socks, underwear, books and personal items. These are given to area shelters and other agencies to distribute to the children in their care. The Society also contributes to the activities of Camp Aim, which serves disabled children with a summer day program. Finally, All of Us Care is an afterschool program in one local district where Society members spend time offering tutoring, crafts, and life skills training.

The members are "very devoted and all pitch in and work" says Ms. Talarico. "Most of us are on all the committees," she says, yet they desire to remain unsung, in the background. Questioned about the year-round commitment and the many demands of several ongoing projects, she responds passionately: "Once you start, what it does to you (helping the children) – honestly it's so gratifying."

To learn more about the Christ Child Society of Pittsburgh, call 412-485-9581 or go to the Society's website at christ-childsocietyofpittsburgh.org. The Pittsburgh chapter meets on the third Thursday of each month at 11:30 A.M. at All Saints Church in Etna.



THE CHRISTIAN FAMILY MOVEMENT



An October 1961 report to Bishop Wright from the Pittsburgh Christian Family Movement lists among its many fine works an entry that’s puzzling for its time: “leading Mass responses in parishes.” What could this have meant then, prior to Vatican II when laity did not actively participate in the old form of the Mass? Today we cannot know for certain, but a few things we

may reliably venture: if members of this lay apostolate were able to “lead Mass responses” – whatever that action was in a Tridentine liturgy – it speaks to the great reputation and respect for this worthy apostolate and to the engaged nature of the people who served their parishes in it.

Engagement is a hallmark of the Christian Family Movement. The apostolate is a whole family ministry, based on the simple, patent premise that entire families serving and following Christ’s teachings together will powerfully bring about change for the common good. Member families meet each month or more in one another’s homes, for discussion and to plan some just action urged by Gospel values. The movement is mostly parish-based, but groups can also be neighborhood-based.

“[T]alking and playing and praying together builds a little Christian community within the parish,” said Lauri Przybysz in a 1985 newsletter put out by the former diocesan Office of Family Life. Ms. Przybysz is a long-time CFM member and former Pittsburgher, who now serves as the Executive Director of the CFM USA National Office. “Community strengthens, not only the families, but the whole Church as well,” she wrote in that same edition of the Family Times Newsletter.

The CFM in Pittsburgh formed in the spring of 1954, patterned after the same movements that emerged in Chicago and South Bend in the early 1940’s. By the time of the 1961 report, 45 groups of 285 couples were active in 21 parishes. Always serving in close relationship with diocesan leadership, it is customary for local chapter leaders to report annually to their bishop, and also to speak at regional diocesan meetings.

CFM groups are “very grass roots and very connected to the Church” says Ms. Przybysz. Meetings follow the jocist social inquiry approach that integrates a method to “observe, judge and plan actions” to effect positive change. The methodology is a unifying feature of the movement, particularly strong in Latin American CFM groups, and also “one that Pope Francis is steeped in” she says.

Some of the past works of local CFM groups have been helping to re-settle refugees, coordinating hospitality for foreign students and visitors, and sponsoring ecumenical discussions.

As children age and families change, member couples may move on from the movement to serve the Church in other apostolates. “CFM launches people,” observed Ms. Przybysz. Noting her experience in Pittsburgh, she remarked, members “didn’t quit (lay ministry), but took action in other ways, and grew to be active lay

Catholics.”

Over the years there have been efforts to expand the apostolate here. In the early nineties, in his role as Secretary for Social Concerns, Rev. (now Bishop) Paul Bradley met with CFM leaders to grow new groups in more parishes. In a 1992 letter endorsing CFM to his fellow priests, Father Bradley wrote “[the] ‘movement has always impressed me as a wonderful way to help renew and revitalize family life in our parishes.’”



Today Ms. Przybysz agrees. “When people encounter the CFM, their response is ‘this is just what we needed.’ It’s easy to start in a parish. It doesn’t take money or a facility” and, she notes, “we welcome mixed-church families.” Ms. Przybysz acknowledges there are challenges for starting local CFM groups in our busy culture. “It’s a struggle for modern families to make a regular commitment,” she says, and admits that finding leadership is not always easy – but it’s vital for the movement to thrive. “It takes a dedicated couple to shepherd it along,” she says.

In Pittsburgh, one of those couples is Sam and Juliette Tirone of St. Philip Parish in Crafton. The Tirones also serve on the national board of CFM and invite those interested in becoming involved to contact them at (412) 458-5052 or to visit the CFM website at www.cfm.org.

From the Christian Family Movement prayer: “Through good example and prayer, may our homes become what you desire them to be: true domestic churches, temples of your glory, and schools of humanity, ushering in the reign of God. Amen.”



EMMAUS RETREATS

Those who've attended Emmaus retreats describe an encounter with Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit that's life-changing. Like St. Luke's telling of the meeting on the road to Emmaus, the experience of an Emmaus weekend is a transformational journey that invites the Lord to open eyes, hearts, and the Scriptures in a unique and powerful way.

"The experience is unbelievable," says Marlene Kish of St. Thomas More Parish. Ms. Kish made the Emmaus retreat when it was first offered here in June 2010, and she's been involved ever since. "It really can change people's lives."

The retreat is a complete weekend experience unlike typical parish retreats. Having experienced both, Ms. Kish describes the Emmaus weekends as "a little more intense." The retreats are shrouded in a bit of a mystery, not for a secretive purpose, but to preserve the retreat experience for newcomers.

Groups are limited to just 28 people – either all men or all women – and the schedule follows a structured program. Emmaus weekends are to be taken just one time, yet it's not a "once and done." It's not a conversion, but a conversion experience, or, as Ms. Kish describes, a "spiritual awakening."

The Emmaus movement began as a men's apostolate in 1985 in Miami. A parish group of men desired to form a ministry to "bring others into a closer walk with Jesus Christ," shared Chris Cipollone, the local connection to the Emmaus Men's group. Seeing a need to foster greater faith and discipleship in Christ, they hoped the retreat would inspire deeper devotion and faithfulness – not only for those attending but for them to share and inspire the larger parish community about the retreat experience.

The name Emmaus conveys enlightenment and a walking with the Lord. Like the Gospel story, the retreat is about taking a pathway to discipleship or a returning to discipleship, like Christ's two apostles who journeyed toward Emmaus after his crucifixion and death.

"A lot of people are looking for something to enhance their journey, their journey with Jesus. Everyone who's on that retreat is there for a reason," she says, adding that anyone may attend an Emmaus retreat. She also notes that the relationships made while on the retreats are deep and lasting.

"One of the most powerful things you have is the prayer of the group. You have all these sisters praying for you. Somebody will always come up to the plate for you. It's powerful." She continues, "we're all looking for something. At this retreat, you'll find



it," says Ms. Kish. She credits the powerful intercession of the Holy Spirit at the Emmaus retreats. "If we didn't have the Holy Spirit, it wouldn't work. It's all about allowing the Holy Spirit to work within us."

Men's and women's retreat teams are now active in the North Hills and Eastern suburbs, as well as the original South Hills apostolate. To learn more, visit Pittsburgh Men's Emmaus on Facebook or call St. Thomas More Parish at (412) 833-0031.



THE EMMAUS ROAD (Luke 24:13-35)

The story of the Road to Emmaus is from the Gospel of Luke. Two disciples, broken hearted over the recent death of Jesus, encounter a man on their journey to Emmaus. As he walks with them, he opens their hearts and minds to the Scriptures and to Jesus. Worn from their journey, the disciples invite the man in for dinner and rest. Sitting at a table, the man took bread and broke it. When he gave it to them, they immediately recognized him as the risen Jesus and He vanished from their sight – leaving them with the bread, a renewed faith, and an everlasting sign of his presence.



FAMILY PROMISE

What does 24 loads of laundry look like? To some a mountainous housekeeping chore, yet for one Family Promise volunteer, it's a work of mercy and hope for homeless families in need. For the past 15 years, she, along with her late husband, has washed and prepared linens and laundry – 24 loads at a time – for guest families through St. Benedict the Abbot Parish's commitment to Family Promise.

"It's a people-to-people ministry, and soul-changing for the volunteers," says Mary Spinabelli, the program's coordinator at the Peters Township church. "It's amazing the people who are willing to help," she adds, referring to the St. Benedict parishioners who step forward to serve the families in need. "I draw a lot of inspiration from our volunteers, many of them seniors."

Beyond just a place to stay, Family Promise offers displaced families genuine hospitality, friendship, and practical help, through a hosting parish and its corps of dedicated volunteers. For a week at a time, the church team mobilizes to provide meals, evening activities, and overnight accommodations for a family that would otherwise be on the street.

Four Catholic parishes regularly open their doors to welcome the families in safe, private quarters somewhere on the church property. During the days, family members have places to go – work, school, or the Family Promise center in Crafton where volunteers drive them each morning and pick them up each evening. Overnight shelter is not provided there – nor is it available anywhere for intact families.

That's where faith communities step in. In addition to St. Benedict, other participating Catholic churches are St. Anne in Castle Shannon, Saints Simon and Jude in Greentree, and St. Patrick in Canonsburg. A new hosting site will soon open at the Society of St. Vincent de Paul Manchester center in the former St. Joseph school on the North Side.

For the parishioners at St. Patrick, Family Promise demonstrates a true witness to the Body of Christ and its many parts in action. Aiding the program coordinators are various church lay ministries who willingly offer their talents in multiple ways. Folks



from the Knights of Columbus, the Ladies of Charity, the Youth Ministry, the music ministry – even unaffiliated parishioners too – all have shared in corporal works for the mission of Family Promise.

For many years St. Patrick's parishioners felt a persistent call to somehow respond to homelessness, said Deacon Joe Cerenzia. They learned of the program nearly 20 years ago, then known as the Interfaith Hospitality Network, yet it was not workable at the time. That changed in 2015 when St. Patrick's pastor, Father Jack Batykefer bought the property next to the church – a large 2-story frame dwelling in great need of rehabbing.

"It all came together with the purchase of the house," says Deacon Joe. He, the volun-

teers, and their very supportive pastor, Father Jack, each attribute to the Blessed Mother the realization of Family Promise ministry there. During the blessing service held at the house's completion, Father Jack dedicated the home to the Blessed Mother under her title Madonna of the Streets. "She's the perfect patron," says Lisa Cerenzia, Deacon Joe's wife and a leader in the apostolate. The Madonna image hangs in the living room, Lisa adds, "front and center for everyone to see."

"Mary's House" became a labor of love, and very hard, urgent work for the St. Patrick crew, but they credit Our Lady again with the quick completion of the renovations – done in just 3 weeks' time. "From the onset, our Blessed Mother was guiding this," says Lisa.

"Talk about miracles," adds Greg Sulc who coordinated the extensive renovations. "When we got the house, we said a prayer. When we came inside, we said more prayers." Parish ministries were approached to help out, and within a short time, the crew of workers grew to more than 60 people. As word of the project spread beyond the parish, supplies and labor came in from the entire community. "Everything you see in this house has been donated," added Greg, citing how materials and furniture items would often be left at the house outside on the side porch.

"People are so happy to provide, whether it's a whole meal, an entrée, even a loaf of bread" shared Lorraine Gregus who co-coordinates meals for the guest families. Grateful to accept all items, she glows: "We get to learn about the people from our church – not only helping the homeless, but building our





**St. Patrick's Church,
Canonsburg, PA**

FAMILY PROMISE (continued)

community.” She’s learned about the plight of the guest families, too. “I was just amazed. It changes your view of who the families are. They’re in your own community, but going through a hard time in their life.”

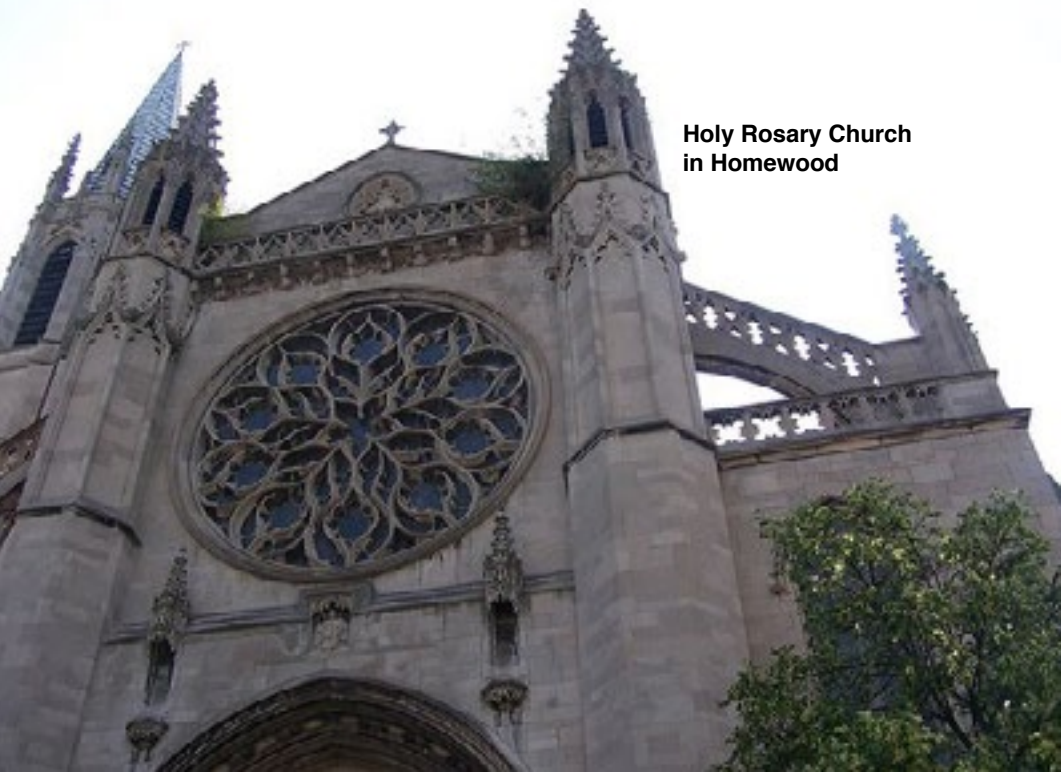
Lorraine shares a story about running into one of their former guests in a local store where the woman was now working. “She patted me on the shoulder and told me how thankful she was because she was here ... how (the house) was so inviting, and made her family feel welcome.” The woman confided to Lorraine that she felt more loved by

the Family Promise folks than her own family. “It is this collective effort,” says Lorraine, one “for all to contribute and come together. Not only do we have them (the families) for that week, we have friendships.”

These friendships are strengthened during the evening activities, when various church groups step in and take a part. The parish music ministry brings instruments in for group sing alongs in the living room. The Ladies of Charity donate craft materials for fleece blanket making, and the Knights of Columbus donate books and prizes for Saturday night Bingo games. Youth ministry teens have provided Christmas gifts for the guest children, and one of the Religious Ed teachers, a stylist, offers haircuts for family members during their stay. Some parishioners come just to visit with the guest families and join the family fun. “You can’t explain it, the feeling you get” said Lorraine, describing the times together. “When you leave here you have a sense of peace.” And about the housekeeping – those 24 loads of laundry? Beyond supplying clean linens for the families, Ms. Spinabelli tells how that parishioner also prays over the laundry, inviting God’s love to bless the

families through it. The blessings work both ways. Recalling his impression of Family Promise back in November 2015, Greg at St. Patrick’s says “My first thought was ‘it’s not a Catholic thing.’” Now after experiencing Family Promise for a couple of years, he admits, “Wow, was I proven wrong.” The caring for brothers and sisters in need, serving together as the Body of Christ – it’s the most Catholic thing.

Read and learn more about Family Promise Southwestern PA at www.familypromiseswpa.org.



**Holy Rosary Church
in Homewood**



THE LADIES OF PETER CLAVER

Marion Smith-Reynoso admits that it was her love of fashion that led to her association with the Ladies of Peter Claver. Her introduction to the group came as she watched their inspiring procession at the start of a memorial Mass she was attending. Captivated by the impressive sight of the solemn ladies, uniformly clad in white outfits, sashes, and headwear, she wondered to herself, “They look nice, who are they?”

THE LADIES OF PETER CLAVER

(continued)



Ms. Smith-Reynoso laughs now about the occasion and how God used the moment years ago to draw her into the apostolate where she's been a dedicated member and leader ever since. "God has a sense of humor," she says. "I was attracted by the white suits. My love of clothes attracted me."

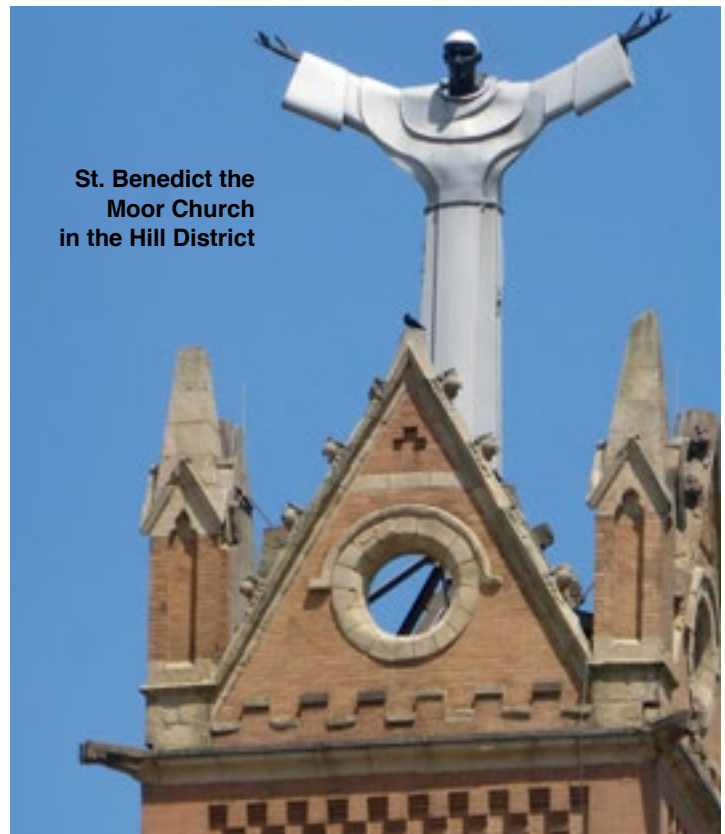
In the Diocese of Pittsburgh the Ladies and the Knights of Peter Claver began in May 1986 thanks to the efforts of two pastors of largely African-American churches, Father David Taylor of Holy Rosary and Father Louis Vallone of St. Benedict the Moor. The local chapters began with approximately 12 men and 25 women. Although the apostolate was well established around the country, these are recalled to be the first Peter Claver affiliates in this diocese.

The Knights of Peter Claver originated in 1909 in Mobile, Alabama. At the time, the Knights of Columbus did not allow people of color into their ranks. From the original Peter Claver Knights, five offshoots grew to include women and young people: Ladies, Junior Knights, Junior Daughters, Fourth Degree Knights, and Ladies of Grace Meritorious. Today the Knights of Peter Claver and its affiliates are the largest Black Catholic lay organization.

The mission of the apostolate is simple as it is broad: to promote the Church. To this end, says Ms. Smith-Reynoso, there are multiple ways that members serve. "You name it you've got members (Ladies) involved: bereavement, worship, liturgical, stewardship, vocations." Aside from parish ministries, the apostolate is also inspired by the New Evangelization call to reach into the neighborhoods. In faithful service to Christ and the Church, the group's efforts aren't focused only within the flock but also in the larger community. For the Ladies, building the kingdom means building the neighborhood as well.



Ms. Smith-Reynoso remembers a cookout and rummage sale



St. Benedict the Moor Church in the Hill District

organized for the Marian Plaza senior housing complex in the eastern part of the city. The event took place in the high-rise's parking lot, located on a prominent neighborhood corner. The smell of the grill and the lure of the rummage sale bargains soon drew the entire neighborhood.

"We started cooking the barbecue at eight in the morning. We didn't advertise, but the smell would bring people all day. We were there from 8 to 3, ending just in time for 4 o'clock Mass." The event raised money for sickle cell research. Recalling the spirit and success of that day, Ms. Smith-Reynoso says, "By day's end, we'd be tired but smiling."

The group's latest initiative is a children's reading program, designed to encourage literacy and raise awareness about Black Catholic saints. Ms. Smith-Reynoso sees this as a unique opportunity to evangelize to children. "There are many programs for young adults, for older people, for those who've left the church," she says, "but not for children, for them to get a deeper conversion experience."

While Ms. Smith-Reynoso advocates the apostolate as one for whole-family participation, the challenge remains to grow the groups. "We can't seem to keep the men, but it's in God's time," she says. She remains hopeful. "Our job is to work so the family of the Knights is visible, even if it's through the Ladies." It's something she says "We always leave to God," and she adds "God knows what we need. When it's time to change the water into wine, he'll send the help when he's ready."

For more information about the local chapter of the Ladies of Peter Claver, please contact Marion Smith-Reynoso at 11311 Althea Road, Pittsburgh PA 15235 or (412) 731-4847.



THE LADIES OF CHARITY

The wide and vibrant presence of the Ladies of Charity in Pittsburgh is a strong witness to their mission to help wherever there is a need. Throughout the diocese, this ministry of service is active in those same communities for which we pray *On Mission!* – Allegheny, Beaver, Butler, Greene, Lawrence, and Washington counties. Indeed all corners of the diocese have been blessed by the works of this lay apostolate. Remarkably, the Ladies of Charity have been at work in Pittsburgh for a mere 58 years. Considering the scope of their service and the expanse of their member groups, one could imagine their roots in Pittsburgh as old as the group’s founding by St. Vincent de Paul in early 17th century France.

At that time, parish priest Vincent de Paul and laywoman Louise de Marillac formed a group of women to continue the acts of charity begun with the caring for a single, destitute family. Today the confraternity that they founded has grown to encompass a broad and varied Vincentian family of charity. This family includes professed religious sisters, brothers and priests, in addition to numberless laypeople who have served over many years as Ladies of Charity and in Societies of St. Vincent de Paul in their own dioceses and parishes around the world.

In Pittsburgh, the Ladies of Charity are a large and growing apostolate. “We are very fortunate because we have over 1,500 members in 71 parishes,” says Judy Weismann, current President of the Executive Board of the Pittsburgh Ladies of Charity. Here the ministry is unique because the groups are parish-based; this is not the case in other cities where members serve at large or in regional groupings.

“It’s very grassroots and parish-oriented,” says Deacon Fred Eckhardt, whose mother Grace was a co-founder of the Ladies here. It may be thanks to the vision of Mrs. Eckhardt and co-founder Margaret O’Konski that the groups operate within parishes. This was the model from the start, and “Grace was a pioneer” adds Ms. Weismann.

Deacon Fred, who serves at St. Bernard Parish in Mt. Lebanon and who restarted a Ladies of Charity group there two years ago, shared the remarks of a local priest, now retired but well-acquainted with Mrs. Eckhardt over the many years of his priestly service. About his tenacious mother, Deacon Fred tells what the priest recalled to him: “Whenever he was assigned as a new pastor, within a week or two he would receive a call from Grace Eckhardt to start a Ladies of Charity there.”

The homepage of the Ladies of Charity tells the moving story of the society’s formation in Pittsburgh. It’s a re-counting of a funeral Mass whom no one attended – no one but Margaret “Peg” O’Konski, who, by chance, happened to remain in church one

morning after attending an earlier Mass. Moved by the anonymity and loneliness of the forsaken souls, Mrs. O’Konski was inspired to organize a group of ladies who would attend funerals for those deceased who had no one.

It is this ministry of presence, the very simple but powerful act of being present which has been the hallmark of the Ladies of Charity. Without fanfare or publicity, this presence to those in need has been a constant in parishes across the diocese for nearly six decades through ministries of hospitality, service, prayer, and visitation.

One hears the word “service” a lot when talking about the Ladies of Charity. Comparing the extensive works done in dozens of parishes around the diocese, Deacon Fred allows there may be “very few common threads other than open to service. They really do meet the needs of the parish where they serve, whatever the needs.” And there is great hope that this will continue to grow. Each year new Ladies of Charity are received by the bishop in the annual Investiture Mass. At Deacon Fred’s parish of St. Bernard, he describes how the apostolate was re-ignited to now have 21 members. “They’re on fire” he says of the still new group, eager to offer service in their own parish and beyond for the needs within the community.

Among their many works across the diocese, the prayerful presence to the deceased is a service that the apostolate continues today. In many parishes, the Ladies participate in funerals and bereavement outreach. Each year on the second Sunday of November, members from throughout the diocese gather to offer a memorial service at Calvary Cemetery, to remember and pray for unclaimed souls, and to recall their own foundational charity work.

Local projects of the Ladies of Charity include making and delivering meals for the homeless, visits to the homebound, and providing holiday gifts for those who might otherwise go without. The society is committed to serving for years to come – and not only within their parish families. The Ladies of Charity mission statement tells that their work “goes beyond strictly parochial matters and embraces the total community.” “Our mission is taking care of the elderly, the sick, the poor, and they are not going away,” says Judy Weismann.

To learn more about the Ladies of Charity in Pittsburgh, see its website at locpittsburgh.org.

