

DIOCESAN NEWS

Auburn food pantry proves a 'light in diocese'

By Kathleen Schwar
Staff writer

When Charles and Suzanne Norton took over coordinating the St. Alphonsus Food Pantry in Auburn 14 years ago, they were told the work would be rather simple. They'd be "handing out a few bags of food a month," Sue recalled.

Last month alone, however, they and several other volunteers handed out boxes for nearly 6,500 meals for 718 people in 162 households, from the church garage.

In the last fiscal year, they provided nearly 75,000 meals. The food went to more than 2,600 adults and 4,500 children.

Sue noted after her husband signed on to work with the pantry, she and their three children were quickly drawn in.

"The next thing I knew we were all involved," she said. Today about six other volunteers help the couple run the pantry.

They take in food from the parish and community food drives. Father Foster Rogers, St. Alphonsus' pastor, noted that the Nortons are undaunted by government paperwork and acronyms, applying for FEMA and SNAP grants, and for food the Food Bank of Central New York supplies.

On Nov. 9 St. Alphonsus marked the pantry's 25th anniversary; a covered-dish supper was served at the church.

"We thought it was quite a milestone. For any place to have a food pantry for 25 years is quite a testimony," Charlie said.

"It started out as kind of an emergency

service, just for parishioners, but has blossomed into one of the biggest food pantries in the county," Sue said.

The pantry, the parish social ministry committee's main endeavor, is the only Catholic, volunteer food pantry in the county, according to Father Rogers.

"I think it's a wonderful light in our diocese," he said.

When the priest arrived at the parish 18 years ago, he recalled, "I went to help someone, and I was told, 'Father, you don't do that — we do that.'"

The pantry, which networks with other pantries in the county, is open six mornings a week, and for emergencies. Charlie, 74, still works full-time, but does the paperwork and helps on-site over the weekend.

Anyone who calls the pantry number, 315/252-0710, can expect a return call within 24 hours.

"If the need is there, we have to address it, even if it's 10 o'clock at night," Sue said. "It's important they get what they need."

In September, for example, police called after finding some children begging for money for food. The Nortons supplied food immediately, and social services workers later notified them they were on the case.

The Nortons are proud the pantry has never had to close or turn anyone away. But, Sue said, "I have left on a Saturday and said to my husband, 'I don't know how we're going to open Monday, there's nothing left on the shelves.'"

The food simply shows up, she said. Just

this month a Jewish girl planning for her bat mitzvah asked that her guests bring canned foods for the pantry as their gifts.

Both Nortons stressed the pantry could not exist if it weren't for the generosity of the parish — and others such as St. Mary's, St. Hyacinth, St. Peter and Paul Ukrainian, and St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox.

The state Department of Health chose the pantry as one of 10 sites for a current study of the effects of welfare reform, according to Liz Crockett, of the Food Bank of Central New York in Syracuse.

"They're busy and have a good relationship and rapport with customers. People feel comfortable," she said of the Auburn pro-

gram. Needs are expected to increase, she said, but it's too early to gauge the impact.

Sue said that with fewer food stamps, and rising home expenses, "People are getting desperate ... Single moms with two or three kids at school need this, need that and the next thing they know they're out of money."

Sue expects the pantry and extra volunteers to prepare about 400 Thanksgiving baskets this month. Like the other provisions the pantry gives out, they'll go to anyone in the community regardless of religious affiliation.

"We don't ask. We don't care. As long as you are in need, that's all we need to know," Sue said.

Uplifting gift

Matt Payne stands with his friend Evan Cummings, both freshmen at McQuaid Jesuit High School, Brighton, while Father John Costello blesses a new elevator at the school Nov. 12. An anonymous donor funded the elevator on Cummings' behalf.



Greg Francis/Staff photographer

Rochester to host national Catholic Charities conference in 1999

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

In 1999, Catholic Charities USA's national conference will return to Rochester for the first time in 19 years.

The event is scheduled to take place Oct. 1-3 at the Rochester Riverside Convention Center. Catholic Charities' national president, Father Fred Kammer, SJ, visited Rochester Nov. 11 to meet with several diocesan and community leaders who form the national conference's honorary host committee.

Since the 1980 Rochester conference, Father Kammer said, Catholic Charities' service efforts have swelled — yet so have the needs of those who seek these services.

Father Kammer noted that Catholic Charities served 3.2 million people worldwide in 1981. That number had risen to 10.8 million by 1995.

In addition, Father Kammer noted that about 30 percent of the 1981 recipients required emergency assistance — food, shelter and protection from violence. Nearly 70 percent received such care by 1995.

These statistics, Father Kammer said, reflect "an entrenched poverty that seems to be getting deeper and deeper."

Father Kammer said that the Rochester conference will provide a chance "to explore how Catholic Charities, in the diocese and throughout the state, can address critical community concerns."

Kammer and Jack Balinsky, diocesan director of Catholic Charities, noted that these concerns include:

- Assuring a smooth transition from welfare to work in the wake of federal and state reform legislation.
- Meeting needs of SSI recipients and developmentally disabled people impacted by assistance changes.

• Providing safe, affordable housing for families, the elderly and people with special needs.

• Developing a cost-effective continuum of care for the health, social and housing needs of senior citizens.

• Promoting a consistent life ethic by strengthening adoption and child-care programs.

Catholic Charities' national trustees designated Rochester in mid-1996 as the 1999 national conference site. Diocesan Catholic Charities officials had first approached Father Kammer about hosting the conference during the 1995 event in Milwaukee.

"I was impressed by their enthusiasm and good humor," Father Kammer said. He joked that he never got from his salad to his main course after the persistent contingent began its pitch.

He said that the Rochester Diocese's location — allowing easier access for Canadian

Catholic Charities delegates — as well as its commitment to social ministry, factored into the selection process.

"With 550 staff and 3,000 volunteers, that's a major contribution to the national Catholic Charities movement," Father Kammer said of the many Catholic Charities-affiliated agencies across the diocese.

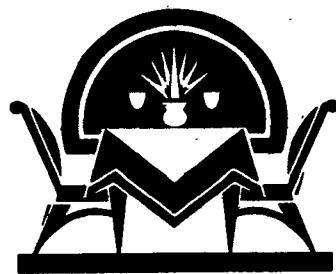
Balinsky credited this firm foundation to the "solid track record" of Fathers Charles Mulligan and John Firpo. The two were directors of the diocesan Office of Social Ministry, the forerunner of what is now Catholic Charities.

Patrick Fox, diocesan Catholic Charities board of directors president, said he hopes anybody involved with Catholic Charities, as well as other local charitable groups, will attend the 1999 convention.

"All people can benefit," said Fox, who will also serve as the convention's local coordinator.

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