

FEATURE

Martha ministries support, comfort bereaved

By Liza R. Mugnolo
Editorial intern

While her sister Mary sat by Jesus' side, Martha busied herself serving Jesus during his brief visit (Luke 10:38-42). Martha also exemplified the biblical tradition of helping those who are bereaved, as evident with her approach to her ailing brother, Lazarus (John 11:1-3).

The timeless art of hospitality continues today with the Martha Ministry in many diocesan parishes including St. Paul's of Webster, St. Francis de Sales in Geneva and St. Mary Our Mother of Horseheads.

This ministry primarily provides funeral receptions on church property. Such a convenience frees families from the overwhelming task of feeding a large group of funeral guests while they themselves are grieving.

At St. Paul's Parish, the families provide the necessary foods, while Connie Campisi, co-chair of the Marthas, selects people from a committee to assist with meal preparation. The parish may provide baked goods, coffee and punch for the receptions.

"We're the social ministry designed to help St. Paul's Parish in times of need," Campisi said.

St. Paul's ministry started about 10 years ago, and evolved into the Martha and Martins Ministry, as its male members preferred the masculine reference, she said.

She said the "M and Ms" also prepare crisis meals, which are distributed to families undergoing surgeries or other difficulties. They also prepare sunshine baskets, care packages "just to let them know the parish family is concerned with their welfare."

Each November, the Martha and Martins organize a memorial Mass at St. Paul's where all those who have passed away over the year are announced and remembered.

"It's a very worthwhile ministry," said Mary Kay Winters, one of the original members of this ministry, which currently consists of about 150 volunteers.

According to Bob Grassi, co-chair with Campisi, members of the M and Ms are invited to join a specific committee, whether it's in charge of funeral receptions, crisis meals, sunshine baskets, sympathy cards, or the memorial Mass.

"We have a lot of good people that volunteer here and come back," Grassi stated.

St. Francis de Sales' Martha Ministry was started about a year ago by Father Ronald Harley, former parish pastor, and engendered a response of about 200 volunteers. Theresa Caito said that Father Harley initially gave the Rosary Society the responsi-



Andrea Dixon/Staff photographer

Mona Sparr (right) teases her aunt, Margaret Ventura, on July 18 at St. Francis de Sales Church in Geneva. The women are part of the Martha Ministry. They prepare food donated for funeral receptions.



Rene Greco slices doughnuts before a reception by the Martha Ministry at St. Francis de Sales Church.

bility of carrying out the ministry. A separate committee now administers the program, under Caito's direction. Like that of St. Paul's, this ministry provides funeral receptions and sends out sympathy cards.

"The people just marvel at it," said Caito, who also serves as vice-president of the Rosary Society. "St. Francis de Sales is a very giving parish."

While the parish supplies food and beverages, the Martha Ministry goes to work preparing the meals in the basement of the old St. Francis DeSales School building for a funeral reception.

In Ovid, Holy Cross Parish even offers families three guest bedrooms in the former rectory, thanks to the creative hospitality of Father Bernard M. Maloney, OFM Cap., pastor of the Seneca County parish.

"It's all cleaned up and painted," stated Sandy Huhn, parish receptionist. Ovid, she noted, is some 20 miles away from the nearest hotel, and sometimes a family has many funeral guests arriving from far away.

Meanwhile, women of Holy Cross make

use of the building's huge dining room, china, glassware and kitchen to provide warm receptions for grieving families.

St. Mary Our Mother in Horseheads provides services for the bereaved through its Lazarus Society. Father Thomas Burr, pastor, derived the title from a book about church ministry called *The Total Parish Manual* by Father William Bausch.

"I've always felt that we don't do enough when a person dies," remarked Linda Stundtner, coordinator of the society. Her husband, Harold, died 17 years ago, when they lived in another community.

As parish council chairwoman at St. Mary Our Mother she learned of various programs, and presented her ideas to Father Burr, who became pastor several years ago. Jim Lynch, funeral director from Van-Buskirk-Lynch Funeral Home and a parishioner, helped develop the program.

"It's like we all came to the same idea at the same time," Stundtner said.

Today the Lazarus Society prepares funeral meals, offers visitation to the funeral home, and sends sympathy cards as well as cards throughout the year after a death. If requested, a volunteer accompanies a family member to the funeral home upon the death of an individual. Funeral meals are prepared in either in the family's home or St. Mary Our Mother School basement, at the family's discretion.

The Lazarus Society provides something tangible, Stundtner said. "This helps them when they're most vulnerable."

Families who suffer a death also may contact a volunteer at any time for conversation, company and general support.

Stundtner, a retired teacher who has a master's degree in counseling from Alfred University, usually receives these calls.

"I think sometimes people don't know what to say at a time like that and don't know how to go about helping. If someone is dying, they kind of just back away. You say 'I'm sorry' and it drops. People kind of fumble around for the right words. This kind of gives them a focus."

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