

Shawl ministry offers comfort, hope

Heather Felton/CNS

VENICE, Fla. — With a prayer for Mary's guidance, the woman was wrapped in a soft tan shawl decorated with beads and charms. The shawl was an unexpected gift offered as a prayer that recent family troubles would soon come to an end.

Dangling from the fringe were beads with the letters of her children's first names, a tiny Bible, a decade of the rosary, a smiley face and a broken shell for the pain she was experiencing.

Then, several of her friends laid their hands on her, and the women prayed that she might find comfort in the shawl and the prayers of hope and love that accompanied it.

The concoction of soft yarn can be called a peace shawl, comfort shawl or prayer shawl. But for this woman and thousands of others who have received one, the shawls are not only a beautiful piece of handiwork, but a tangible expression of prayer and comfort.

That is the concept behind the Shawl Ministry, created by Victoria Galo and Janet Bristow.

According to the Web site www.shawlministry.com, they originated the program in 1998, shortly after the two women graduated from the Women's Leadership Institute at the Hartford Seminary in Connecticut.

Galo told *The Florida Catholic*, Venice diocesan newspaper, that during their studies they were challenged to use their leadership skills and strengths to help others. Both she and Bristow had had experiences with shawls and, after talking about them, realized the positive



Heather Felton/CNS

Hand-knitted wraps created by women at a Venice, Fla., parish are given to those who are troubled and in need of a bit of warmth and caring. The shawls are adorned with small symbols of faith and sometimes beads of a decade of the rosary and a cross.

power in them.

So their Shawl Ministry was born. Their first recipient was a friend going through a divorce.

The woman, Galo said, was overwhelmed by the gesture and the thought that "all her sisters" had prayed for her." The ministry grew from there.

In the Venice Diocese, Galo's mother, Gladys Cole, has launched a Shawl Ministry at Epiphany Cathedral Parish in Venice.

Each week, she and about 15 other women meet at the cathedral library where they ceremoniously wash their hands, pray and light a candle

before beginning to knit or crochet the shawls. They also have discussions about different women of Scripture, which, Cole said, is meant to be an educational component of the afternoon.

In knitting the shawls, Cole said, the pattern of knit three, pearl three is symbolic of the Holy Trinity and the Holy Family. By doing it over and over, the knitting is "a prayerful experience," she said, "whether you know who you're giving the shawls to or not."

Once the knitting is completed, the knitter adds little charms to the tassels at each end of the shawl to per-

sonalize it for the recipient. Although she adds different things for each person, based on their personality or what she may know about them, there are certain things she always adds: a silver thread symbolizing a silver lining, a bell for grounding and a sea shell to remind the owner of baptism and of Florida's gulf water that many often take for granted.

"They know it was made in love," she said. "Prayer and positive energy goes into the shawls."

If the recipient is a Catholic, Cole adds a rosary decade and little cross.

The shawls have been given to abused women, hospital patients, people with serious or critical illnesses, men and women in need of spiritual strength. Or they're given simply as a show of love, prayer and appreciation.

"Everyone is very receptive to receiving these shawls," Cole said. "To me it's like having God's arms around you, Jesus' arms around you."

Shawls have been sent around the world, Galo said, as far away as Afghanistan, Portugal and South America. Winter residents of Florida have carried a shawl back home when they return north to such places as Canada, Cole said.

Ecumenical in design, the ministry has spread beyond Catholic parishes. People of many other faiths have heard of the ministry through word of mouth or the Internet and brought it back to their congregations.

"It breaks down barriers of religious differences," Galo said. "It is women coming together and dialoguing about their faith and their families."

Lottery winner gives back to Catholic Church

George P. Matysek Jr./CNS

DUNDALK, Md. — For much of her life, Bernadette Gietka has dreamed of writing and producing a musical that would celebrate the sanctity of life.

But the parishioner of Holy Rosary Church in Baltimore had never been able to scrape together enough money to get the project off the ground. Frustrated by constant roadblocks, Gietka decided to let God know she needed help.

Gietka, 54, recalled the boldness of her plea to God. "I just said, 'I'm so disgusted.' I told God, 'I know what you want me to do with my life but I don't have the means to do it and I'm never going to have the

means to do it.

"I said, 'It's up to you. It would benefit you to make me rich,'" continued Gietka, known affectionately to her family and friends as Bernie.

Three weeks later, on June 19, Gietka bought what turned out to be the winning \$183 million ticket in the Mega Millions interstate lottery game.

Choosing to take the cash option, the part-time letter carrier for the U.S. Postal Service walked away with \$112.8 million — the second largest payout to an individual winner in U.S. lottery history. After taxes, Gietka received \$76 million.

There's absolutely no doubt in her mind that God was behind her good fortune. "I mean, the odds of win-

ning were 135 million to one. There's no way! It couldn't have happened to me any other way," she told *The Catholic Review*, newspaper of the Baltimore Archdiocese, in an interview that was the only one she granted despite requests from all over the country.

Gietka, who is single, said one of her top priorities is to work on her musical, which she prays will help women choose life over abortion.

Gietka plans to tithe 10 percent of her winnings to the church and charitable causes. She is paying for air conditioning to be put in her parish church, hopes to help pay for a new roof at Our Lady Queen of Peace Church in Middle River, and plans to donate funds to promote religious

vocations.

The Catholic Church has always been an important part of her life, Gietka said, noting that she is particularly grateful to Felician Sister Claudia Rostek, who led a Renew group at Holy Rosary that helped parishioners develop their relationships with God.

Gietka said no one should ever doubt the power of prayer. This Christmas, she said, she prayed for a personal request that was granted.

"It was just as extraordinary as this (winning the lottery)," she said. "So I always say never doubt, especially the Holy Spirit, because he'll never let you down. Anytime I need help, the Holy Spirit never lets me down — never."