

Going in peace to love and to serve

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Joanne Sanders/CNS

When we greet friends and acquaintances, the conversation very often begins like this:

"Hi! How are you?"

"Fine, just very busy."

We have so much to do! Yet, many people juggle a job, family responsibilities and leisure time, all the while maintaining an inspiring generosity. These are ordinary people doing extraordinary things and bringing the Gospel to life in their "worlds."

There are so many opportunities to bring Christ into everyday life: feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, being present to the poor in spirit. For Christ, no one is anonymous, no one forgotten.

But living in a suburban parish of more than 3,000 families can be an anonymous experience for many. So our parish is very active in adult faith formation and social outreach. And through social outreach, parishioners who are less involved meet and get to know others.

Many parishioners select one or two actions each month that they can fit into their busy schedules to serve others. Sometimes it is as simple as a brief lunchtime conversation with a co-worker about last Sunday's homily or how one's moral ethic can be lived out.

Or it can be as challenging as working with an immigrant Afghan family. Several families in the parish — parents and children — visit the immigrant family's apartment to tutor, help them learn English or lend

support on living in a new culture.

Other families from several Christian Family Movement groups have put together what they call "packages for the poor." Wrapped food, pop-top cans of food and prayer cards are placed in bags and kept in the volunteers' cars. As volunteer families commute to school, sports or shopping, they offer one of the packages whenever they encounter a homeless person on a street corner. This nourishment of mind and body feeds both the giver and the receiver.

Some working people, after rising at 4 a.m. on Fridays, gather at the parish to cook breakfast tacos, which they will take to the place where laborers are waiting in hopes that someone will offer them a job for the day.

Area churches also volunteer for Loaves and Fishes, a program that has people fill a van with sandwiches, socks, blankets and hygiene items for distribution to homeless people living under highway overpasses.

Still others volunteer for the Habitat for Humanity "Catholic Build," discovering that many hands make light work. Sharing a few hours to help a family get their first home is a joyful experience.

The last words of the Mass are: "Go in peace to love and serve the Lord." For each of us, this is a choice.

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Kimberly Nebgen/Catholic Voice

"Sharing a few hours to help an immigrant family get its first home is a joyful experience," says Joanne Sanders.

Christian marriage is witness for the Gospel

Andrew and Terri Lyke/CNS

The love others see in the day-to-day life of married couples actually preaches the Gospel. That love is based on a promise made about an unknown future, and it starts with faith in a goodness that will endure "til death do us part." Thus, it reflects God's own committed love.

St. Francis of Assisi said: "Preach the Gospel, always. And when necessary, use words." Perhaps his statement helps to clarify what it means when we speak of baptized people "preaching" the Gospel to the world.

As marriage educators, we ask engaged and newlywed couples to consider what their marriages might be like in 50 years. Then we tell them that if everything in their married lives were to unfold just as they en-

vision it, they would be short-changed, hoodwinked and cheated. A Christian marriage is shaped by God over time.

We tell them that frequently they will have to bear their crosses in marriage and that, very often, their spouses will be the heaviest crosses. But in such times, their actions will convey the teaching of Jesus: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. ... For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? ... If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? ... You are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:43-48).

This teaching is key for married people, for there are times when a

spouse can seem to be the "enemy." And it is then that love matters most.

At such times, love is a decision for the good of the other and is not based on how one feels at the moment. When love endures in challenging times, spouses find that their marriage is being shaped by God, reflecting the paschal mystery of death and resurrection.

One might ask: "Why bother with all the suffering? Why not let the fun times roll until they run out, then find a newer, more exuberant love?" But that's the culture of divorce.

Our response to such reasoning is the same message we give engaged and newly married couples: If your marriage is shaped only by your limited hopes, wants and needs, you will get no more than what you are capable of creating. However, if you submit to God's design by embracing

your cross, the paschal mystery lives in you, and you will become more than what you can imagine.

Only when married couples faithfully carry their crosses and are willing to die to themselves for the sake of the other will theirs be transformed by God. The grace of the sacrament of marriage resurrects their love and recreates something fresh and new.

In the end, after a lifetime of dying and rising, the marriage stands as a testament to God's ever-reconciling love, and the people who have shared their lives are richer for it.

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