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Philadelphia Catholics, in bad times, face hard choices

Christine Graf | Apr. 30, 2009

Project HOME aid recipient (Photos by Megan Pellegrino)

For the family of Kraig Null, a financial planner who owns his own business, the downturn in the economy means cutting back and living simpler, but one item he doesn?t intend to cut is the family?s donation to their parish, St. Thomas of Villanova, located in a wealthy suburb of Philadelphia.

Those donations, part of the weekly collection, are essential to funding many organizations within the Catholic community in this region, and one that is especially dependent on help from the outside is St. Thomas?s sister parish, Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament located in West Philadelphia, a poor area of the city.

This parish runs a food pantry that provides for the needs of their community.

"We sometimes run out of food and have to use the money from our sister parishes to run out and get more - or our families don't receive food," Amelia Sheen, who runs the food pantry at Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament, said.

Although Null and his family might not be going out to eat as much due to the economy, they know they will always have food on the table, something families who benefit from Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament's food pantry can?t take for granted.

"We have a responsibility to be good stewards...and part of that is to give back because there are a lot of people who are far worse off than we are," Null said.

Anne Murphy, director of Christian service and family life at St. Thomas of Villanova parish, explains that although some in the congregation are affected by the economic downturn, the parish understands the concept of "we not me," and donates 10 percent of its weekly collection to other charities outside their parish. t

This is promising news for St. Malachy parochial school located in the poor area of North Philadelphia. The

school has seen a serious decrease in funding in recent months, but is trying to fill the gap in its resources by approaching other donors for additional support and developing additional creative plans.

"That is where faith is made real. It's in the commitment that people of faith have, and are willing to contribute to the mission of St. Malachy," said Father Kevin Lawrence, the pastor at St. Malachy parish.

The principal of St. Malachy school, Laura Hoffman, feels parents of students at the school are not as personally affected as others by the current downturn because many are already living below the poverty line. All but one student is on a scholarship or grant for tuition at the school. Funding from outside the parish is crucial in continuing the mission of St. Malachy School, the education of children from low-income families.

Not far from St. Malachy is another Catholic charity, Project HOME, that is feeling the crunch of the severe economic downturn. Project HOME, started 20 years ago to break the cycle of homelessness and poverty in Philadelphia, today serves more than 7,000 people a year.

"We have more people at our door with less resources," Sister Mary Scullion, a Sister of Mercy and co-founder of Project HOME, said.

Project HOME has an employment services office that has witnesses firsthand the greatest hardship of this recession, unemployment.

"I've been looking for a job without very much success. It's the most difficult time I've ever had," said Benjamin Murdoch, 62, client of Project HOME's employment services.

Murdoch's been out of work for over a year and has been living in a friend's garage.

He spends his days at Project HOME's employment office where he gets job leads and can use the phone and internet for his job search.

"I do everything I can to find a job, and they're just not there," Murdoch said.

Hannah Lee, employment specialist at Project HOME's employment services, said it is deeply frustrating to see qualified people who want to work unable to find work and support their families.

"Love has to cast out fear. We're in this together, and we need to work harder, smarter, fairer and simpler," Scullion said.

In these times of economic uncertainty, when even those of wealth are feeling the pinch, communities like St. Thomas of Villanova seem to be trying to find the balance between living more simply and maintaining their mission of helping others.

"I don't believe it's the end of the world and that our financial system is collapsing,? said Null. ?If you have strong faith and a balance of faith in your life, you realize it's not all that bad in the bigger scheme of things."

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