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Japanese American's life dedicated to serving the poor

Tom Gallagher | Apr. 18, 2011

Thomas Kobayashi at St. Matthew Parish in Seattle in 2010 (Kerry Dahlen)

A recent parish survey by the Catholic Volunteer Network revealed that 81 percent of Catholics over the age of 40 had volunteered before. While 77 percent of survey respondents volunteered for less than one week at a time, 10 percent volunteered for long periods (nine months or more).

?It takes a special person to make a lifetime volunteering commitment to serving the poor,? said Jim Lindsay, executive director of the Takoma Park, Md.-based Catholic Volunteer Network.

For one Japanese American, Seattle resident Thomas Kobayashi, no amount of hardship stopped him from helping Japanese families before, during and after World War II, even while in confinement in the United States.

In fact, Kobayashi, now 94, has been volunteering for more than seven decades.

Kobayashi is one of the longest-serving lay members of the St. Vincent de Paul Society in the United States. The international organization is dedicated to serving the needs of the poor person-to-person.

Kobayashi was born on Sept. 4, 1916, into a poor family, the oldest of six children. He has two sisters still living. ?So I knew what it was like to be poor,? Kobayashi said during a recent telephone interview.

?I was taught at an early age by Maryknoll sisters who instilled the idea of doing what is right to help the poor,? he said.

In 1934, while attending the University of Washington, Kobayashi joined the St. Vincent de Paul conference associated with Our Lady of Martyrs, a Japanese parish. The pastor was Maryknoll Fr. Leopold Tibesar, who was fluent in Japanese and also served as the spiritual advisor to the St. Vincent de Paul conference.

In March 1942, as World War II was unfolding, Kobayashi and his family were among those of Japanese ancestry forced into the American ?relocation centers? or internment camps. The entire parish community was relocated to the camps. Tibesar went with them. At Camp Harmony in Puyallup, Wash., Kobayashi assisted as a chaplain. They were then transferred to Minidoka Camp in Hunt, Idaho.

Undeterred by his circumstances, Kobayashi continued the work of the St. Vincent de Paul Society in the camps, collecting extra food and clothing for those in need. He wrote reports and sought prayer materials from the National Council of St. Vincent de Paul. He was Tibesar?s altar server at daily and Sunday Mass in camp.

On Dec. 31, 1942, Kobayashi wrote in one report: ?The brothers [members of the society] are doing their best work now and the results can be seen in the number of the non-Catholics receiving instruction. É Our brothers can look back on the last nine months spent in assembly and relocation centers and say that much has been accomplished. May the New Year increase our flock a hundredfold. Pray for us.?

While in the Minidoka internment camp, Kobayashi volunteered for the U.S. Army?s 442nd Regiment Combat Team. He was later transferred to the military intelligence unit.

?That was a story in and of itself, especially since my parents were locked up,? Kobayashi said.

Two years later he was discharged and reunited with his family. Kobayashi moved back to Seattle.

Kobayashi and Japanese Catholics in Seattle organized a ?Japanese Relief Committee? and sent food, clothing and medicine to the St. Vincent de Paul Society in Nagasaki and Tokyo. The care packages were then distributed to individual families. Letters from Japanese families expressed profound gratitude for support. Kobayashi was chairman of the committee from 1946-47.

?It was about 1950 in which I made helping the poor a lifetime goal,? Kobayashi said. ?The Bible says that we will always have the poor, so I thought, ÔThat?s a job for me,? helping the poor.?

Kobayashi never married and spent much of his professional career as an accountant for the Port of Seattle.

Kobayashi served in practically every leadership post in the parish-based and regional organizations of the St. Vincent de Paul Society.

Today, Kobayashi lives across the street from St. Matthew Parish in North Seattle and continues to attend Mass and St. Vincent de Paul meetings.

?Tommy Kobayashi is a sign of enduring dedication and faithfulness to the poor,? said Fr. Rogelio Barcelona, pastor at St. Matthew. ?He is an enduring witness of service to the poor.?

?Tommy rarely misses the setup meetings for delivery of goods to the poor,? said Pat Olson, the parish?s St. Vincent de Paul conference president. ?Tommy is inspirational, steady and strong and always offers constructive insights to our work.?

?I joined St. Vincent de Paul because I witnessed Tommy?s own dedication to the poor,? said member Paul Tran. ?We jokingly refer to Tommy as our own St. Thomas because he?s such a powerful icon among us.?

?Thomas Kobayashi is a man ofÊgreat faith and compassion and has always seen the face of Christ in those he has served and I know they have seen the face of Christ in him,? said Roger Playwin, national executive director of the St. Louis-based Society of St. Vincent de Paul. He called Kobayashi ?a gentle soul who followed in the footsteps of our founder, Blessed Frederic Ozanam. He looked for the best in others and always found it.?

Kobayashi?s perseverance, longevity and faithfulness are as needed today as the world begins to help the Japanese people recover from the earthquake as it was during World War II.

As Playwin puts it, ?Thomas Kobayashi is an example of what servant leadership is all about.?

[Tom Gallagher writes *NCR*?s Mission Management column. Contact him at tom@tomgallagheronline.com.]

Resources

To learn more about Thomas Kobayashi, visit the Densho Web site, which preserves the testimonies of Japanese-Americans unjustly interned during World War II: archive.densho.org/Core/SegmentsByInterview.aspx?id=430

St. Vincent de Paul Society

www.svdpusa.org

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