NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Pastor, parish open legal aid clinic for the poor

Tom Gallagher | Jul. 19, 2013 Mission Management

Asking a pastor for food, clothing or financial assistance is a common occurrence, especially in these difficult economic times. Asking the pastor for legal advice is not so common. Except in the case of Msgr. Robert Meyer, pastor of Sts. Peter and Paul Parish in Hoboken, N.J., and a civil and canon lawyer. Many seek out the pastor for legal advice.

"Pope Francis said in a recent homily that the Holy Spirit is annoying and urges us to move ahead, making us walk, pushing us to get out of our comfort zone and encouraging us to move forward," Meyer said. "I felt that Spirit working through the numbers of people who were asking me for legal help, pushing me to think about leading this parish in a new and unique way."

Meyer graduated from Seton Hall University in South Orange, N.J., and received a sacred theology degree from the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, a graduate degree in moral theology from Rome's Lateran University, a canon law degree from The Catholic University of America in Washington, and a civil law degree from Seton Hall University School of Law.

Meyer is also an adjunct professor at Seton Hall's Law School, College of Education and Human Services, and College of Arts and Sciences. He has also acted as a legal adviser to the nuncio for the Permanent Observer Mission of the Holy See to the United Nations. (Disclosure: This writer serves as a volunteer on the Holy See mission's Path to Peace Foundation fundraising committee.)

Sts. Peter and Paul established an ad hoc parish committee to consider the idea of a legal clinic. The parish finance committee agreed to fund the clinic for the foreseeable future, though the business plan calls for significant fundraising and for nominal fees to be paid by clients who can afford to do so. This year's budget will be approximately $50,000 and next year's budget is expected to approach $100,000.

Since the parish sits on the Hudson River across from New York City, the separately incorporated, not-for-profit legal aid clinic is aptly named The Waterfront Project Inc [1]. It began in March. Its mission is to ensure equal access to justice by providing legal advice, referral, consultation and representation in civil legal matters to low-income, homeless and otherwise disadvantaged individuals and families of Hudson County.

The clinic will have no problem finding clients. Some 10 percent of Hoboken's 50,545 residents live below the federal poverty level, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Meyer relied on parishioners and his personal Rolodex to secure personnel to staff the clinic.

The board of trustees consists of Meyer, Lucas Swanepoel (University of St. Thomas School of Law, 2005), a legal attaché at the Holy See's Permanent Observer Mission to the U.N., and Al Cooley (Seton Hall University School of Law, 2010), an assistant general counsel at a New York City-based financial services firm. Attorney Elizabeth Caraballo (Seton Hall Law School, 2007) was hired as the first director.

"I was a clinical student when I was in law school and a volunteer for Volunteer Lawyers for Justice," Caraballo said in a recent interview. "I always wanted to use my law degree and any other assets I have to help the community. I interviewed with Father Bob, he asked me to join, and it was quite seamless."

To qualify for free legal services, potential clients need to either have a gross income limit of 125 percent of the federal poverty level, be homeless, be elderly who need legal assistance to secure and maintain essential basic needs regardless of income, or be experiencing an undue hardship. Each of these criteria can be verified.

Potential clients who fail to meet those criteria can still receive legal services if they are willing to pay a nominal fee, such as $50 for a simple will preparation, $15 for help completing basic forms, $30 for a review of lease agreements, or $5 for notarizations.

The clinic has five potential clients, including some child custody cases, a landlord/tenant matter, a social security matter, and a property dispute.

"We're really excited and gaining momentum," said Cooley, who met Meyer at Seton Hall. "It's an important ministry of the church, which will bring to light so many justice issues that often get swept under the rug."

Cooley said the clinic will have many volunteer opportunities for attorneys. "They can assist clients, even on a limited scope basis, or they can come in and offer a seminar to our clients," he said.

"What we are doing reflects a fundamental principle of the church, to help the poor," Cooley said. "That's important."

[Tom Gallagher writes *NCR*'s regular Mission Management column. His email address is tom@tomgallagheronline.com.]

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[1] http://www.thewaterfrontproject.org/