

'Charity for people, all people'

Parishioners' impulse to serve extends across pew, street, globe



KATIE COLLINS | CATHOLIC HERALD

A Nativity scene welcomes the faithful to Church of the Nativity in Burke, home to a parish community with a passion for service.

By KATIE COLLINS
Catholic Herald Editorial Assistant

Nativity scenes are a regular feature at parishes during Christmastime, but the Holy Family outside Church of the Nativity in Burke remains year-round, a sculptural triad of Joseph, Mary and the infant Jesus that depicts a family infused with love that shines out into the world. It's a fitting image for the parish.

"Every parish has various charisms," said Father Wilson "Bill" I. Korpi, parochial vicar. "This parish's No. 1 charism is charity — a charity for people, all people."

A look into the Nativity community reveals a charity not merely defined by financial assistance to the poor. "The goal is not about money, but to move people's hearts toward those in need," said Father Richard B. Martin, pastor.

And from their neighbors across the aisle to those across the continent, the hearts of Nativity parishioners are compelled to serve generously.

Father Korpi's insight emerges from a long relationship with the parish; he's a new priest, but not a new face, at Nativity. He served the community as a permanent deacon for 10 years, until his wife's death in 2003. He then felt called to enter the seminary and was ordained a priest in 2008. He has been parochial vicar of the parish since July.

Church of the Nativity was founded in 1973 by Father Frank J. Ready to serve the increasing number of Catholics in central Fairfax County. Services were held at a Springfield school before the church was dedicated in 1977.

Jim McDaniel, director of "Operation Starfish" — the parish outreach to Haiti and other Third World countries — and a parishioner since the Springfield days, said the parish has "seen some ups and downs over the years." In 2001, a former pastor pleaded guilty to diverting parish funds for personal use.

Yet a strong bond emerged from this hardship, and the parish has since doubled in

size, according to McDaniel. There are currently 13,956 parishioners, with a healthy religious education program of 1,401.

Part of this resilience might be attributed to Father Martin, pastor since 1996, who "sets the tone of the parish," said Josefa Lopez, parish secretary.

"He is so generous, always with and for the people," she said.

McDaniel said the furniture in Father Martin's office comes from parish yard sales and that "he would give you the shirt off his back."

And from shirts to shawls, food to boats, the parishioners "work across the street and around the world," said McDaniel.

At a parish level, there are countless ministries, including the prayer shawl ministry, in which participants pray as they knit shawls for ill parishioners, and the "Mom and Me" cooperative, "designed to address the needs of mothers and their children," according to Nativity's "Ministries & Resources" booklet.

Andrea Schempp, assistant principal of Nativity School, said the spirit of charity promoted by Father Martin not only has nurtured the parish, but also the school. "He's called us to be caretakers of each others' hearts," she said.

The impulse to be caretakers "translates to the outside," said Father Martin.

"Whenever there is a crisis, people instinctively come here, Catholic and non-Catholic," said Father Korpi.

After 9/11, a man who lived across the street from the church was grappling with a personal heartbreak related to the tragedy, and he came to the parish for help, said Father Martin. "I remember him saying, 'Somehow I knew you were the kind of community that could help me.'"

Many of the ministries reach beyond parish and school boundaries, such as the Women of Nativity, which sponsors, among other programs, a "Christmas in August" to

distribute school supplies to underprivileged children.

Perhaps the most ambitious service legacy is Operation Starfish. McDaniel said Father Martin was inspired to start the program in 1998 while thinking about ways parishioners could walk faithfully through Lent. Father Martin wanted to encourage the parish to "reach out to the poorest of the poor," said McDaniel, and he selected Haiti as a beneficiary "because of the depth of poverty there."

Prior to the January earthquake and recent cholera outbreak, volunteers from Nativity built six villages, more than 800 houses and purchased nine fishing boats for Haitians.

Each village is supported by a fishing co-op and represents an investment of approximately \$60,000, said McDaniel.

Father Martin said that one or two groups of about 15 parishioners travel to the villages in Haiti each year, and the parish raised \$200,000 to help Haitians in the aftermath of the earthquake.

Operation Starfish works in conjunction with Food for the Poor, a nonprofit that ministers to impoverished people throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. After Nativity started receiving inquiries from parishes across the country about the program, Operation Starfish was trademarked by Food for the Poor to support and promote its efforts. More than 300 parishes and schools have adopted Operation Starfish, said McDaniel.

On the web

For more photos and an extended story, go to catholicherald.com.

McDaniel said he keeps up daily with events in Haiti, especially through his communications with Father Duken Augustin, a priest living in Cap-Haitien. In an interview last month, McDaniel said the city was virtually shut down by riots triggered by fear of cholera.

Nativity parishioners, always quick to respond, were in the process of packing a sea container full of Gatorade, soap and Clorox, items to help prevent and cope with the disease.

McDaniel, reflecting on continuous parish efforts to offer material and spiritual

Quick facts

Church of Nativity
6400 Nativity Ln.
Burke, Va. 22015
703/455-2400

Pastor: Fr. Richard B. Martin

Parochial vicar: Fr. Wilson I. Korpi

DREs: Srs. Donatella Merulla and Mary Attilia Todaro of the Congregation of the Handmaids of the Sacred Heart of Jesus for Reparation

Mass Schedule:

Sat.: 9 a.m., 5 p.m. vigil,
7 p.m. (Spanish)
Sun: 7:30 a.m., 9 a.m., 11 a.m.,
12:45 p.m.
Weekdays: 7:30 a.m.

Parishioners: 13,956

School: Nativity School
6398 Nativity Ln.
Burke, Va. 22015
703/455-2300
Principal: Maria Kelly
Students: 279

Website: nativityburke.org



support, said that "connecting with the poor has made us more compassionate, more generous overall."

Inscribed above the church entrance is "This is My house and from this spot My glory will shine"; through labors of hearts and hands, Nativity parishioners work to fulfill this declaration.

Katie Collins can be reached at kcollins@catholicherald.com.

Next week's profile:
St. Agnes in Arlington

Operation Starfish

...making a difference one person at a time..

To learn more about how you can help our brothers and sisters in Haiti visit:

www.starfishmission.org