

St. Fidelis' Outreach Program Hits the Streets to Help the Needy

Nearby parishes also help out the College Point project

by Bill Miller, Senior Reporter

COLLEGE POINT — The weather was chilly, still, dozens of people swarmed small card tables piled high with sandwiches, fresh produce, canned goods, toiletries, and clothing offered by St. Fidelis Street Outreach near the intersection of 14th Avenue and College Point Boulevard.

The “guests” filled plastic bags, shopping carts, and pockets, chatting happily in their native languages: Arabic, Bengali, Mandarin, Pashto, Spanish, and English.

The Street Outreach, held on the first Saturday of each month, usually lasts from 10 a.m. to noon, but on April 2, wrapped up early.

“We never know exactly how many people will come,” said Sister Ruth Lantt, who leads the outreach. “We open for our guests at 10 a.m.; by 11, we are usually out of most supplies, but we stay until noon.”

And that is what happened on April 2. But later, two staffers for Vickie Paladino, who represents the neighborhood in the City Council, showed up with additional boxes of canned goods. That was just in time for the arrival of a young woman with a sad-faced little boy. A volunteer handed him a can of soup, and he smiled.

The Street Outreach began two years ago during the pandemic, but by then, St. Fidelis Parish had already had a lot of experience helping the needy.

Father John Francis, the current pastor, arrived in 2020 after serving at St. Nicholas of Tolentine Parish in Jamaica, Queens. He soon learned that his new parish had a well-established food pantry and experience running a respite homeless shelter, just like his previous post.

Sister Ruth said the shelter had to close because of plumbing issues. When Father Francis arrived, she asked if the parish’s volunteers who had helped the homeless before could create a street outreach.

“I was just all for it,” Father Francis said. “I came from the other parish where they were doing that type of thing. And especially, 2020 was a year to help the poor and needy. So this was very much in compliance with that.”

Since then, the outreach has become a team effort involving groups from other parishes and other denominations.

On April 2, the youth group at Holy Trinity, Whitestone, under the direction of Tom Lynch, brought supplies. The youth participate in many outreach programs, such as delivering supplies to food pantries. They also fellowship with people with autism.

“We do for whoever needs,” Lynch said. “Jesus didn’t question, so we don’t question.”

The Girl Scouts at St. Mel’s Parish in Flushing made the sandwiches. “They do all the work, and I bring it,” said scout leader Teresa.

The “Hungry Monk” rescue food truck from All Saints American Old Catholic Community Church in Ridgewood, Queens, rolled up with huge boxes of fresh carrots, onions, and cabbages.



Volunteers for the St. Fidelis Street Outreach wrapped up another successful ministry on Saturday, April 2. At center is Sister Ruth Lantt, the organizer. The rest of the team includes (left to right) Tony Leon, Debbie Henrich, Erin Neeson, Erik Menjivar, Joanne Fogarty, and Valerie Kaplan. (Photos: Bill Miller)

Sister Ruth, a Dominican nun, was a lawyer before she took her vows in 1996. She still belongs to the bar and specializes in immigration law. But she has worked with the homeless for more than 40 years.

She organized four-day mission trips to the Bowery Mission in Lower Manhattan. Now St. Fidelis is one of the Bowery’s “partner” churches. She said the street outreach volunteers get to know the regular guests. They also learn what these people need beyond sandwiches and hand sanitizer.

For example, Sister Ruth described how she tries to connect homeless men in College Point with services offered by the Bowery Mission.

She acknowledged that these efforts frequently start well, but many men eventually return to the streets. Sometimes a volunteer must mark success by a homeless person accepting a sandwich for an empty stomach.

A guiding scripture, she said, is Matthew 25:35-40: “For I was hungry, and you gave me food, I was thirsty, and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me ... whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.”

“God doesn’t ask us to be successful,” Sister Ruth added. “He asks us to be faithful. It’s not my job to fix the world. It’s my job to do what I can, and it’s our job, collectively, to bring God’s love and mercy to people.”

John McArdle, who showed up later on April 2, said Sister Ruth is a longtime advocate for him. He said his mother was a secretary in a law firm where Sister Ruth once worked.

“She helped me out,” McArdle said, “And we got along on



Guests looking through the offerings at the St. Fidelis Street Outreach on Saturday, April 2.

a really good level. She’s a real sweet lady.”

Sister Ruth praised the volunteers who staffed the giveaway tables for having “a servant’s heart.” She noted that the outreach is actually a two-fold ministry — serving the guests and the volunteers.

“People are looking for a place to be holy, to do God’s work,” she said. “None of my volunteers have to be here. They have other things they could be doing on Saturday morning. Plenty of them have their own problems. And yet month after month after month, here they are.”

“I honestly believe that a ministry like this is providing a place for people to do the work of angels.”