

Ministries join to help Poor

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Pete Schaad stopped his car in front of Akilah Barksdale's house on Conkey Avenue July 18, donned his wooden St. Vincent de Paul cross and said a prayer: "May we see Christ in the poor and hope they see Christ in us."

Schaad heads up the St. Vincent de Paul Society's St. Frances Xavier Cabrini Parish Conference, which focuses on providing furniture to families in need in northeast Rochester. He visited Barksdale to give her information on how her family could receive donated furniture items from the ministry.



Photo: John Haeger / The Catholic Courier

Barksdale explained that she had been living in the two-story house since the spring. She had furnished the home as best she could with a sofa and loveseat, a mattress and box spring, a makeshift cot-style bed for her 10-year-old son and a couple of dressers. Her 4-year-old daughter was sleeping in a portable bed.

Schaad explained that Barksdale would have access to the ministry's furniture donations, which are stored in a parish garage. She could pick out whatever she needed, Schaad noted, but as there are not enough volunteers to make deliveries, she would need to find a way to bring the donations home herself.

During her visit with Schaad, Barksdale said she had never heard of the St. Vincent de Paul Society before being referred to the ministry by Catholic Family Center.

"Not everybody wants to or tries to help out the community" as the society does, she said. "I think it's a blessing I did find them. I really do."

In part to help out more families like Barksdale's, the St. Vincent de Paul Society Conferences in the Diocese of Rochester have come together to form a district Council, Schaad said. The Council is part of the northeast region of the national Society of St. Vincent de Paul, noted Jerry Russi, the District Council president.

"We have formed a Council so we can have a unified presence ... in the diocese," Schaad said. "And this (Council) gives us the opportunity to grow a little bit."

On the Sept. 10 feast day of St. Vincent de Paul, Bishop Salvatore R. Matano will bless the new council during a Mass at St. Mary Church in Canandaigua.

St. Mary Parish was home to the diocese's first parish-level St. Vincent de Paul Society Conference in 1913, said Russi, who previously headed up the St. Mary Conference. Originally, women from the parish sewed clothes for immigrants coming from Ireland and Italy, he said. In the 1940s the ministry evolved into a free clothing and food voucher operation to serve the Canandaigua area and is now called the St. Benedict Parish Conference, he added.

The origin of the national Society of St. Vincent de Paul dates back to 1845 when it was established at the Basilica of St. Louis in Missouri, according to information at svdpusa.org. Bishop John Timon, who was later bishop of the Buffalo diocese, brought copies of the Rule of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul to St. Louis from Dublin, according to the website. The Society had formed in Paris in 1833.

Since its founding, the Society's core work has been the spiritual development of its members, Russi noted.

"If we're not holy with each other, how do we help those in need?" he noted. "Don't join us to help the poor and make yourself feel good. Make yourself more holy, and then serve the poor. ... That (mission) is what makes the society different than any other charity in the world."

Members meet monthly and focus on spiritual development as well as on the volunteer service, Russi explained.

"This Society is not for everybody," he said. "It's demanding. ... This (work) is truly viewed by the membership as to serve God's poor in society. We're not the masters. We are the servants, and that's a gift."

Russi and Schaad added that another important component of the Society's mission is to help keep pastors and parish staff from feeling stretched in trying to meet individuals' corporal needs so that they can focus on their spiritual needs.

"Our job in the parishes is to help ... and relieve the stress of pastors who get the knock on the door at night," Schaad said.

To help relieve that stress for more parish staff, the District Council can apply for grants and work on expanding their reach into the counties in the diocese not being served by the St. Vincent de Paul Society, including Livingston, Wayne and Yates, Russi said. District Council members will begin meeting with pastors in those counties about collaborating with parish social-ministry programs as well as with Catholic Charities and other nonprofit organizations who serve families in need.

"The goal is to get people out of the pews and into the streets to do what Jesus asked us to do and serve the poor," he said.

The District Council has already received \$5,000 from the National Council of the United States Society of St. Vincent de Paul to fund the In-Home Visitation Program to help those assess the needs of families who are in financial crisis, Russi said.

"We want ... to avoid people falling through the cracks," he said. "We want to help them make themselves successful. That's the goal."