Voices of Sisters
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Volunteers prepare groceries for distribution in impromptu outdoor space at the Sisters of St. Joseph Neighborhood Center. (Provided photo)



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On the night of March 17 when we locked up the neighborhood center where I minister, it was hard to tell what the next day would bring. We knew 15,000 pounds of food were being delivered in the morning, but the question of who would be there to unpack it and how we'd distribute it loomed large. With public health warnings about COVID-19 and a suspension of all programming except for our food pantry, we waited to see what volunteers would join us to help.

"God will provide," the sister I live and work with said as we drove home that night. In the morning, a skeleton crew arrived for a highly modified distribution. With only nine of our usual 45 volunteers, we managed to move our distribution outside and feed a record number of neighbors in a day.

This, it turned out, would be the first of many pandemic records. The outpouring of both support and need in our community has been overwhelming these last 11 weeks. Demand for our pantry's services has only grown as the pandemic continues. In comparison to this time last year, we're serving more than three times the number of families each month. With thousands of bags of food distributed, we've seen nearly 300 new families come to us for food in the last three months alone.

If the pandemic has taught us anything it is that flexibility is key, that hunger (and other basic needs) don't follow stay-at-home orders, and that God does indeed provide.

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"God will provide" is a sentiment I thought I believed before this pandemic. Certainly, God provides for our needs; that, after all, is the bedrock of faith. Yet as these weeks have dragged on, I've discovered that the familiar phrase "God will provide" is less familiar than I thought. What once seemed like a simple article of faith has, in fact, evolved into an element of self-discovery and growth. In it I see my reservations and my unbelief; I'm coming to see that God provides in ways far beyond my imagining.

As I was standing in a warehouse the length of a football field a few weeks after the initial shutdown, my nose was filled with the smell of ripe fruit. Palettes of fruit unclaimed by importers towered over the burly men who showed us around the terminal. "The next stop is the dumpster outside," the foreman told us regretfully.

"Do you think you could use some?" he asked as we nodded in awe, taken aback by the sight and thinking of the families in need who were waiting on our return from this morning's errand. "Whatever you want is yours, sisters," he chimed in as he began to load boxes into our cars.



St. Joseph Srs. Bonnie McMenamin and Clarisa Vazquez show off salvaged fruit the Sisters of St. Joseph Neighborhood Center distributed to neighbors. (Provided photo)

Resistance is the edge of growth

Despite all evidence to the contrary, the phrase "God will provide" raises caution within me. "No," I think to myself, "that is a cop out. There must be something we can do." The resistance within me, it seems, is in the belief that I can and should be able to it on my own. This simple phrase shifts the onus; in some ways, I fear that it lets the speaker off the hook.

My caution, I am finding, is rooted in a mix of motivations. There is the myth and pull of the individual that runs strong within me and our culture. Following the false thinking of "*If I can't provide for myself, why should anyone else?*" this individualism trades faith and trust for pragmatism and control. To a desire to control the situation and/or remain self-reliant, hearing someone say "God will provide" is gut wrenching.

Yet it is in the situations where nothing else can seemingly be done — where our efforts only yield so much — that I find, more and more, the phrase "God will provide" passes my lips. As I look at shelves picked bare in our food pantry, the contents of which we've worked tirelessly to stretch so as many neighbors as possible can eat, I know we've done all we can.

Here the phrase is not a sign of giving up but instead is an act of surrender. There is nothing more we can do but believe and know our work is bolstered by God's grace. Then when my phone buzzes with calls about canned goods packed and ready to be picked up at local parishes, I know that, certainly, God provides.

Reality, it turns out, is more nuanced than a gut reaction. "Act as if everything depended on you. Trust as if everything depended on God." St. Ignatius is often cited as saying. The inclination of the individualist is to take the former part of the quote and forget the latter. "I prefer to reverse it," writes author Jim Manney. " 'Pray as if everything depends on you, work as if everything depends on God.' … [this] puts our work in the right perspective: if it depends on God, we can let it go. We can work hard but leave the outcome up to him. If God is in charge we can tolerate mixed results and endure failure."

From this perspective, God provides not because we will it or because we see the world through rose-colored glasses, but because faith allows us to be free, to trust that all will be well and also to know our part in the work of God. We are not the master craftsmen; we are workers in the field.

I marvel at the graces that weasel their way into the potential hopelessness of these days. After an undocumented and now unemployed family came to us in haste unable to pay their bills, a regular volunteer, who can't come to help because of health concerns, unbeknownst to the situation-at-hand sent us her stimulus check with a simple note saying she didn't have much but certainly had all she needed and could share this in her physical absence.



St. Joseph Sr. Bonnie McMenamin, director of the Sisters of St. Joseph Neighborhood Center, right, greets Sonia, a student from her English for speakers of other languages class, during distribution. (Provided photo)

By no fault or cause of our own

These days, I shake my head as the phrase "God will provide" passes my lips. I recognize the mixture of gratitude and astonishment beneath the words, both from lessons learned and for promises kept.

I must admit the phrase still catches in my throat from time to time. *Who is this person speaking?* I think to myself. Trust takes time and faith blossoms bit by bit. And if I'm honest, I know that the phrase "God provides" spoken in the aftermath of such cases comes much more easily than "God will provide," the faith-filled declaration of trust in what is yet to be.

Still, God provides, by no fault or cause of my own. People's kindness and generosity abound as casseroles appear at our doorstep, plants are nurtured in our community garden, homemade masks are delivered from across the country, and donations and volunteers of all stripes and sorts continue to arrive.

Walking past one of our classrooms on a recent weekday, I noticed a tiny statue of the Blessed Mother facing out toward the impromptu staging area for food distribution. We wouldn't distribute for another week, but the forecast called for rain and so a sister had faced the statue outward to ward off the bad weather. Continuing down the hall, I smiled to myself. In the past, I would have smiled at the thought that that would make any difference. This time, though, the smile on my face grew as I turned back toward the classroom. "God will provide." I repeated to myself as I took a closer look at the tiny statue.

"God will provide," I smiled to myself, as I picked up a large wooden statue of the Blessed Mother from across the room and put her next to her smaller counterpart.

"God will provide," I softly repeated in prayer, "but one can never be too safe."

[A Sister of St. Joseph of Philadelphia, Colleen Gibson is the author of the blog Wandering in Wonder and has been published work in various periodicals including America, Commonweal and Give Us This Day. She currently serves as coordinator of services at the Sisters of St. Joseph Neighborhood Center in Camden, New Jersey.]