News

Members of the Gleischner family dressed up to volunteer for the annual Thanksgiving dinner put on by the Sisters of St. Joseph in Erie, Pennsylvania. Many families volunteer year after year. (Courtesy of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Northwestern Pennsylvania)

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What can you do with approximately 25,000 pounds of turkey, 18,500 pounds of potatoes and 630 gallons of gravy? To start with, you can serve more than 32,000 Thanksgiving dinners.

And if you're the Sisters of St. Joseph of Northwestern Pennsylvania, you can also use the occasion to hand out nearly $800,000 to like-minded organizations in the Erie Diocese in recent years.

Catholic women religious serve those in need year-round, of course, but their efforts take on a larger significance — and larger proportions — during the holidays. For the Erie Sisters of St. Joseph, their annual Thanksgiving meal is one of their biggest undertakings of the year. Last year, their army of volunteers delivered 1,200 turkey dinners with all the trimmings.

"It is a lot of work," said Sr. Mary Fromknecht, one of the first sisters to help with the project. "But the people you serve that are able to celebrate Thanksgiving that maybe would not be able to, is a wonderful thing."

People stand in the snow in 2005 waiting for the Sisters of St. Joseph’s Thanksgiving dinner in Erie, Pennsylvania. (Courtesy of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Northwestern Pennsylvania)

The tradition began 35 years ago when Peter Lyons, then-owner of the Marketplace Grill restaurant in downtown Erie, asked Sr. Teresa Marie Bohren if she would like to offer Thanksgiving dinner for those in need at his restaurant. His employees would prepare and cook the food while sisters and volunteers assist as needed and serve the meal. Bohren said yes, and asked Fromknecht to help. Bohren died in May 2023.

"I think they served a hundred and some meals the first year," said Stephanie Hall, director of communications and public relations for the congregation. "The second year it was about 800, and then every year since it's been a thousand or more."

Over the years, things changed: When Lyons retired, the meal moved to nearby Gannon University's campus dining room; later, home deliveries were added, and in 2020 — thanks to the pandemic — it went to home delivery only.

By 2014, the amount of money donated beyond what was needed to pay for the meals reached the point where the sisters began giving it away. Each January, a Mass is held and checks are disbursed to nonprofits in the diocese that serve those in need. Last year, more than $77,000 was donated to the sisters' appeal and after the meal was paid for they were able to give out $66,000 to 50 different organizations.

"One of my favorite days of the year is when we invite all the people we're going to give the money to, have the Mass and then do the giveaway," said Deb Seng, a St. Joseph agrégée and social justice coordinator. "They can take that money and do with it what they need."

Sr. Serena Downs bakes cookies year-round for a homeless shelter in East St. Louis, Illinois, but at Thanksgiving makes them in the shape of turkeys, pumpkins, acorns and leaves. (Courtesy of the Adorers of the Blood of Christ)

The Erie sisters are far from the only sisters with the tradition.

The Sister Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Scranton, Pennsylvania, has an even bigger and older tradition: Sr. Adrian Barrett began serving Thanksgiving dinner for those in need in 1976 — 10 years before she founded the Friends of the Poor nonprofit, which puts on the event. That first meal served 24 people; this year,

they are preparing to serve 3,500 meals by delivery or takeout. The next morning, their Family to Family Program will provide groceries to another 3,500 people.

As you can imagine, an effort that size requires a lot of help, including thousands of volunteers, the City of Scranton and its mayor's office, food banks and other groups and agencies; and they're in the process of raising $250,000 to make it all happen. Organizers say that, even today, the memory of Barrett, who died in 2015, continues to inspire them.

Tom Horvath, "The Gravy Man," served gravy for 30 years in a row at the Sisters of St. Joseph’s Thanksgiving dinner in Erie, Pennsylvania. (Courtesy of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Northwestern Pennsylvania)

Kate Marshall, an associate with the Congregation of St. Joseph in Cleveland, Ohio, has been cooking Thanksgiving meals with the help of sisters since 1982. Before the pandemic, she cooked and delivered up to 90 meals, mainly for elderly shut-ins. Currently, she and her family cook and have volunteers deliver meals to Bethany House of Hospitality that serves newly arrived migrant women and children, and Viator House of Hospitality that works with young adult male immigrants seeking asylum.

The sponsored ministries of the Poor Handmaids of Jesus Christ serve those in need all year, but make a special effort for the holidays. Sojourner Truth House in Gary, Indiana, served about 2,300 clients per month in 2022, while the Poor Handmaids of Jesus Christ Volunteer Program brings groceries and sack lunches to 145 people twice a week at two low-income hotels in Plymouth, Indiana.

Even efforts that seem small by comparison can mean everything to those on the receiving end. Sr. Serena Downs, of the Adorers of the Blood of Christ, bakes cookies year-round for a homeless shelter in East St. Louis, Illinois, but at Thanksgiving makes them in the shape of turkeys, pumpkins, acorns and leaves.

Organizers in Erie say that while they miss the in-person meals, the deliveries were growing more popular even before the pandemic and seem to work better for both the recipients and volunteers.

"I saw the number of people who came in to eat dwindle as we started to deliver," Fromknecht said. "What we seem to find is people who are lonely get their friends together and call in for eight meals so they have company. It seems like we are touching more people in a better way."

When the meals were in-person, volunteers were busy serving food or clearing tables; now the delivery drivers can linger for a minute.

"I delivered for many years, and a lot of people, especially older people, would say, 'Come in, honey. Come see. Here's my dog, here's my bird.' You could just tell they really, really enjoyed that interaction," Seng said. "Once I started doing it, there wasn't anywhere else I wanted to be at Thanksgiving."

Those interactions also let organizers know when people need urgent help.

"We ask all the drivers to take note of conditions: Is the heat on, are there kids running around without socks and shoes?" Seng said. "We do follow-up and try to help where we can."