

Charitable agencies rooted in first bishop's mandate

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Although it was not officially founded until 1923, the Archdiocese of Baltimore's Catholic Charities traces its roots to a 1792 pastoral letter penned by Bishop John Carroll. It outlined the use of parish revenue, dividing it into equal thirds to fund the care for the pastor, church upkeep and "the relief of the poor."

Lay and religious women spearheaded the formation of some of the earliest charitable organizations, including a school for poor and orphaned girls. Caring for orphans - including those who lost parents while immigrating - was central to early efforts. Several religious orders and parishes supported orphanages through the 1950s.

By the mid-1800s, European immigrants were arriving en masse with hope but little else. To meet these Catholics' basic needs, Archbishop Martin J. Spalding called in 1864 for each parish to form a St. Vincent de Paul Society, a model that had begun three decades earlier in France. The Basilica of the National Shrine of the Blessed Virgin Mary - then the cathedral - was the first to start a society, and soon others joined in bringing food, clothing and coal to people's homes. The parish societies laid the groundwork for St. Vincent de Paul of Baltimore, an agency with 13 programs - including Beans and Bread in Fells Point - offering food, housing and job support in Baltimore City and Baltimore County.

In the 1920s, Archbishop Michael J. Curley created a central office for charitable outreach, establishing Catholic Charities, now Maryland's largest social service provider with a wide range of programs. Today, parishes regularly partner with Our Daily Bread to provide hot meals for people who are homeless.

In 1968, the Franciscan Center in Baltimore's Old Goucher neighborhood opened to serve people in need, drawing on the ministry the Franciscan Sisters of Baltimore began in 1891. Other charities associated with religious orders, parishes and lay organizations help families in poverty, people with intellectual disabilities, and women facing unplanned pregnancies.

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