

Missionary Disciples: Holy Spirit orders up 'fast' food in Harford County



Editor's Note: This launches a new series, looking at those who answer the call to "do the work of the Gospel" given in Archbishop William E. Lori's June 2015 pastoral letter, "A Light Brightly Visible: Lighting the Path to Missionary Discipleship."

ABINGDON - It was Lent in 2012 when Laura Mattheiss heeded the call of the Holy Spirit to feed those in need.

"I was hungry (from fasting), and felt it was necessary to act," the parishioner of St. Francis de Sales in Abingdon said, of the reality that others might not know where their next meal is coming from. "Could I do something to make a difference?"

Mattheiss is the driving force behind "Feed 40 Families," an outreach that includes her husband Hugo and their daughter Sarah, a student at Immaculate Heart of Mary School in Towson. Inspired by the 40 days of Lent, it relies on donors to sponsor 40 boxes of nonperishable food - each weighing nearly 40 pounds, at a cost of \$40 apiece, containing meals for a family of four.

She spoke Feb. 17 from the back of a U-Haul truck her husband had rented to distribute food boxes to outreaches at St. Clare in Essex and St. Francis de Sales. Families at Anna's House, a shelter for homeless women and children in Bel Air, received food boxes as well.

"It's a case of one person making a difference and it affects the whole parish, it inspires people," said Father John "Jack" Ward, their pastor at St. Francis de Sales, who taught her Mattheiss's husband at Archbishop Curley High School. "It makes me feel great to see the Franciscan mentality he received put into action."

From Maryland to Florida to Iowa, family, friends, colleagues and strangers support

Feed 40 Families. Mattheiss began it six years ago, borrowing a template of a former nationwide nonprofit, which took paper boxes discarded in offices and filled them with food.

At first, personal vehicles were used. Now, Laura said, “this thing has metamorphosized,” not just into renting a truck for delivery, but into meal planning and buying boxes for the food. Her family purchases the boxes and rents the truck.

Recipient families are provided breakfast items, such as pancake mix and instant oatmeal; lunch and dinner staples, such as canned tuna, chicken and ham, and spaghetti with sauce; as well as canned fruits and vegetables.

The effort kicks off in October, when prior sponsors are asked to continue their support. During a recent food shopping trip, a curious fellow shopper remarked on Mattheiss’ unusual cart of groceries. Laura explained her mission, and the anonymous shopper offered an impromptu cash donation.

Another surprise sponsor allowed for an additional 10 families to receive food this year.

Logistics are tracked to the penny. Spreadsheets track sponsors, purchases and thank-you notes.

There is also the matter of storing 40 boxes of food.

Mattheiss is an account manager for Principal Financial Group. Her regional director is Barbara McCafferry, a parishioner of St. John Chrysostom in Wallingford, Pa. McCafferry, who is Laura’s regional director, offered space in her Columbia office as a staging location.

“Is it not fabulous?” Barbara said of the effort led by Mattheiss. “The good that Laura does touches us all. You can’t help but support her.”

Food donation requests do not always come from the destitute.

Patty Smith, community outreach volunteer at St. Francis de Sales, mentioned a middle-class family of nine, in which the father is battling terminal cancer. The

family was given two boxes of food.

There was Tammy, a wife and mother out on medical leave from her job at a local McDonald's. She arrived at St. Francis de Sales 30 minutes before the designated pickup time Feb. 17.

"I think it's fantastic and I am very appreciative," said Tammy, who expected to return to work.

Mattheiss takes it all in with an eye for the long haul.

"I can see myself doing this for a very long time," she said. "As long as there is a need, I'm going to do this to the best of my abilities."

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