

# Muddy hands, warm hearts: Bowl-making for St. Vincent de Paul fundraiser a way to give back



*Angelo Otterbein and wife, Lauren Calia, join their children Emilio and Isabella at Baltimore Clayworks to make ceramic bowls Feb. 1 for the St. Vincent de Paul Empty Bowls fundraiser. (Tom McCarthy Jr. | CR Staff)*

**By Maria Wiering**

*[mwiering@CatholicReview.org](mailto:mwiering@CatholicReview.org)*

Tables rattled with each thud-thud-thud as bowl-makers pounded their fists into lumps of clay, creating thick pancake-like surfaces. It was the first step in a process that, repeated over weeks and months by a cadre of volunteers of various artistic talent, would yield more than 900 ceramic bowls for St. Vincent de Paul of Baltimore's signature annual fundraising event, Empty Bowls.

Set this year for March 22 at the Timonium fairgrounds, the day showcases soups from Baltimore-area restaurants and includes raffles, entertainment and a silent auction. Lunch and dinner attendees leave with a hand-crafted or hand-painted bowl, a reminder of the people in need St. Vincent de Paul serves.

About one-fourth of the bowls come from Baltimore Clayworks, which hosted 90-minute classes on Saturdays in January and February. Groups and individuals paid \$15 to design a bowl or two, which would later be glazed and fired at the Mount Washington studio.

Among the amateur artists attending a Feb. 1 bowl-making class was Cindy Obermaier, 58, a parishioner of the Church of the Resurrection in Ellicott City. A former Empty Bowls event volunteer, Obermaier said making bowls was another way to give back.

Obermaier shaped her clay alongside two co-workers from The Johns Hopkins Hospital in East Baltimore, where she is an orthopedic trauma nurse. Her work brings her – albeit briefly – into the lives of some of Baltimore City's troubled inner-city residents, she said.

"I just want to help somehow," she said. "I just feel like maybe, seeing what we see, that what we do day-to-day is not enough. I want to do more on a different level."

Two tables over, Lauren Calia, 44, her husband, Angelo Otterbein, 40, and their two children each worked on their own bowl. Emilio, 6, carved tiny faces into the soft clay, while Isabella, 9, contemplated a nature theme for her bowl.

"It's a good way to combine an afternoon family activity with something that's a little more meaningful," Otterbein said. "It will be fun to see our bowls at the event, too."

*To watch a slideshow from the event, navigate the arrows below. See a photo you're interested in purchasing? Click here.*

The family has attended Empty Bowls in the past, and use their keepsake bowls for soup and cereal, Calia said. Other past attendees said they have theirs on display or use them to hold jewelry.

Bowls are made all year long to prepare for Empty Bowls, said Sue Elias, St. Vincent de Paul's director of volunteer resources and a parishioner of St. Pius X in Rodgers Forge.

Clayworks has partnered with St. Vincent de Paul for four of the eight years the event has been held. "Social justice is part of the Clayworks community," said Mary Cloonan, a Clayworks instructor who teaches the workshops.

In addition to hosting bowl-making workshops, Clayworks contributes bowls made by professional artists who work in its studio. Other partnering organizations invite people to paint pre-made bowls for the event.

For more information, visit [emptybowlsbaltimore.org](http://emptybowlsbaltimore.org).

### **Empty Bowls**

**What:** Sample soups from Baltimore-area restaurants and vote for your favorite while enjoying entertainment, raffles and a silent auction. Take a handcrafted bowl home as a keepsake.

**When:** March 22, with two seatings: 12-2:30 p.m. and 5-7:30 p.m.

**Where:** Maryland State Fairgrounds in Timonium

**Why:** The event raises more than \$100,000 annually for the charity, which has programs for hungry and homeless people in Baltimore City and Baltimore County.

**Tickets:** \$20 per person, with group rates available

*Also see:*

The John Carroll School celebrates 50 years of Catholic education

Pope: Don't skip Sunday Mass; people need communion with God, church