

Parishes give in many ways at Christmas

Monsignor Damien Nalepa, the pastor at St. Gregory the Great, sees the best in humanity - and the Archdiocese of Baltimore - every Christmas season.

Hundreds descend upon his West Baltimore parish with boxes of toys, clothes and food. With each Mid-December donation to the church on North Gilmore St., there are hugs and smiles shared between urban and suburban parishioners who have helped make the Adopt-A-Family program a 25-year success story.

Though these people may live in starkly different parts of the archdiocese, they believe they are guided by the Gospel and its call to help the less fortunate. This year was no different, as 1,400 gifts arrived at St. Gregory for distribution to the poor.

"It's just astronomical when you think of the generosity of the benefactors," said Monsignor Nalepa. "People look to the Church for assistance all year long."

Even in the current economic turmoil facing the nation, the season of giving held true to its name in 2008, as churches from Western Maryland to Harford County found innovative ways to help the oft-forgotten members of society.

Twenty parishes, including sister parish **Holy Family** of Davidsonville, worked with St. Gregory this year to sponsor families with children and provide warm clothes, food and toys to brighten their lives.

Holy Family parishioners ignored their own economic worries to deliver 30 trucks full of gifts to St. Gregory Dec. 20. In total, Holy Family program organizer Audrey Bush said 125 families were adopted and an entire wall at the parish was covered with donations.

"It's a big effort, but it's also a lot of fun," Ms. Bush said. "I'm real proud of our church that we're doing this every year."

Here's just a sample of giving elsewhere in the archdiocese this season:

Baltimore City

St. Ignatius' Angel Tree program featured 100 parishioners bringing one toy and one piece of clothing for each of the 50 children helped by the program, which assists children of people in prison.

Co-organizer Dan D'Orazio said, "It's certainly something nice for the inmates to have. There's so much outreach that happens out of the church, we're happy to be a part of it. It's a very socially conscious parish."

St. Ignatius parishioners also participated in a program that drives around downtown Baltimore, giving soup, sandwiches, coffee and fruits to the poor. During those trips in late December, the parish also distributed hundreds of warm hats, gloves, scarves, socks, underwear and toiletries.

St. Wenceslaus of East Baltimore held a Dec. 14 Christmas party for neighborhood children and distributed gift baskets to less fortunate families. It also held a Breakfast with Santa for parish and local children.

Sodality members of **St. Matthew** in Northwood visited with the homebound and those in nursing homes. Cub Scout Pack 648 collected toys for Kindertime Toy Drive and Baltimore Free Store as well.

Hampden's St. Thomas Aquinas had a Jesse Tree to collect men's and women's clothing while the church also reached out to the Greater Baltimore Center for Pregnancy Concerns with supplies and handmade infant clothing.

Christmas at St. Thomas Aquinas, as Deacon Richard "Monti" Montalto expressed, "is a very holy event because what we try to do is express the love of God the father with the gift of his son Jesus."

Anne Arundel County

Parishioners of **Our Lady of Sorrows**, West River, prepared food baskets for 104 families, 81 of which had children who received clothing and toys. **St. Jerome** of

Baltimore, Our Lady of Sorrows' sister parish, had another 80 families receive gifts.

"We have about 30 volunteers to sort and prepare the baskets," parishioner Diane Wittschack said, "but parishioners buy the children's gifts and bring non-perishable food or contribute to the poor box or fresh food items."

The School of the Incarnation in Gambrills collected \$16,000, which Giving Back, Inc. used to purchase clothing, toiletries and backpacks. Students at the school then placed the items in the backpacks, which were to be distributed to those in need in the city on Christmas Eve.

Baltimore County

Timonium's **Church of the Nativity** Giving Tree Program resulted in a wall of toy donations that featured a wreath full of gift cards, trees decorated with boxed Barbie dolls, new bikes and rows and rows of toys. That was only scratching the surface, however, as more bags of clothes, food and supplies were stored in offices as well.

The parish has worked for years with agencies like St. Veronica's Head Start, The Franciscan Center, Sisters Academy of Baltimore, St. Martin's Home, Villa Maria, St. Vincent's Children's Center, **Church of St. Ann** in Baltimore, Beans and Bread, Katrina Outreach, Nigeria and United States Military outreach.

"It's an opportunity to send a message to those we've adopted of Christ's love coming into their lives," organizer Mary Knudsen said.

Carney's **St. Isaac Jogues'** Special Friends, adults with disabilities, had members bring in individual donations for local organizations after helping feed Haitian children last year.

Halethorpe's **Church of the Ascension** had parishioners deliver to 27 families food baskets with gift certificates included. Seniors also helped out fellow parishioners in need, while others made food for Our Daily Bread.

St. Agnes of Catonsville featured a program named "Creche Kringle," which distributed 500 gifts to five Baltimore City parishes. Deacon John "Jack" Ames spearheaded a turkey-giving program for local parishes, and donations to

Baltimore's Our Daily Bread included clothes to combat the winter weather. Students in the religious education program even donated gift baskets to a local children's orphanage. St. Agnes School students also helped with the Angel Tree Project.

"It was amazing how the kids responded," said St. Agnes parishioner Mary Kay Barrick

Harford County

St. Ignatius in Hickory continued to expand its generosity this year.

"We are especially busy during Advent, with many of our parishioners looking for ways to assist those in need during the holy season," said Deborah Czawlytko, the parish's pastoral associate.

Working in conjunction with sister parish **The Shrine of St. Alphonsus** in Baltimore, parishioners donated large amounts of educational toys to St. Jerome's Head Start Program in south Baltimore

Other gifts from St. Ignatius were taken to poor families in Harford County.

Western Maryland

The hall at **St. Peter the Apostle** in Oakland was used by parishioners and a local rotary club to gather gift baskets for those in need. A Christmas party and dinner for poor children was also held.

St. Patrick of Cumberland's St. Vincent de Paul Society collected 105 baskets to help people in the nearby Appalachian area.

Monsignor Thomas Bevan, pastor, said the St. Vincent de Paul chapter is "a legacy of the parish. We are reaching out to others."

Fellow Cumberland parish **Ss. Peter and Paul** identified about 200 children in 75 poor families in Allegany County for gifts. In the last two years, the program took on a shoe collection program for 100 children. There were also 49 families participating in the parish's Giving Tree Program.

“The project has grown over the years and is truly a blessing to our community,” said Darlene Collins, volunteer coordinator for the Giving Tree project. “Every year, more and more people offer to help and we are able to help so many, many children in our area.

“This is the most joyous project I have ever been involved with in my many years at Ss. Peter and Paul Church.”