

St. Bernardine parishioner offers comfort with meals



As a child, Jo Ann Thomas watched her grandmother cook for the retired Josephite priests and brothers in residence at St. Joseph's Manor in Roland Park.

Those memories of growing up around the Josephites (her mother served them as a nurse) surround Thomas when she cooks with commercial-sized pots and pans in the kitchen of her parish, St. Bernardine in West Baltimore.

Thomas is the leader of the Comfort Food Ministry, which provides meals for repasts after parish funerals. For up to 100 attendees, the parish provides a home-cooked meal at no cost. The faith community also tries to send families home with meals for the seven days following funerals.

"We ask for a love donation, or a donation *if* you are able," Thomas said. "And if you are not able, it's no different if you're a millionaire or a person who doesn't have two nickels to rub together. You're treated the same - with dignity and respect."

Thomas has been a member of the Comfort Food Ministry since 2000, identifying closely with those she serves. She draws on the experience of losing her mother and father just four months apart.

"When I started doing it, I remembered how I felt," Thomas said. "It is such a good feeling to be able to relate to these people, go to them and say, 'Do you need

anything?’’

When she asks if families need anything, she said, they inevitably say no. She brings them something, anyway.

“We make people feel comfortable,” she said. “Not just with food, but with whatever we need to do on that day.”

Even a compliment on a grieving person’s dress or family can be just enough to make a difference.

Though she leads the Comfort Food Ministry, she did not begin with that intention.

“You come to serve,” said Thomas, who recently took over leadership of the ministry after the former leader retired following many years of dedicated service. “If you come in with a mentality that you’re in it for some type of self-gratification, or to run things or give people unsolicited advice, it won’t work.”

GET TO KNOW

Jo Ann Thomas

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What is your home parish?

St. Bernardine, Baltimore

Who had the most influence on the development of your faith?

I would have to say my mother (Janet Haywood). She brought me into the Catholic faith from birth and she taught me the importance of spreading the ways of Jesus Christ, and who Jesus Christ was, and how important the Catholic religion is. It's not just a religion, it's a way of life.

Who is your favorite saint and why?

I have to say two. One – St. Jude. I have some impossible situations sometimes that come up that I will go to him and say, ‘Please pray for me.’ People will say, ‘Oh but the doctor said, oh but the bank said, oh but anybody said...’ But prayer works. And then of course I am always losing something. ‘St. Anthony – help me, help me find this, help me find that.’ These impossible situations always go to those two saints.

What makes you proud to be Catholic?

I love that I can receive the host every day if I want, or every week if I want. I love that I can go to any Catholic church and be received the same way. I love it. And I'll say it to my grave. I love all of the opportunities to be taught more about Jesus, about his good works and the Good News of Jesus. I can always count on getting fed each time I go to Mass, each time I'm in a ministry of some sort or involved in anything. I love how it has taught me to live my life with charity, with service and just being mindful of other people.

St. Bernardine's pastor, Monsignor Richard Bozzelli, said Thomas is not only maintaining the ministry, but is honing its excellence.

That includes a standardized menu that Thomas created - rotisserie chickens (bought cooked from Sam's Club), mashed potatoes, macaroni and cheese, string beans, corn and gravy. During the winter, she makes well-loved additions - dressing and sweet potatoes.

"Butter is so comforting," Thomas said. "Butter, cream, mashed potatoes with some nice flavorful gravy - that's so comforting."

The Comfort Food team focuses on details such as cutting the rotisserie chicken, separating the light meat from dark and de-boning everything but the drumsticks and wings.

"Some people would think 'Why do you even bother with all of that?'" Thomas said. "Because we're trying to make people feel good."

Those actions might seem small, she said, but they are helpful to those grieving.

Monsignor Bozzelli called Thomas an "ideal parishioner."

"If there's a need, she just says, 'How can I help?'" he said, adding that she is also responsible and thorough in her work. "You only need five people like that and you can run a parish."

Monsignor Bozzelli meets with the family to determine if there are any special requests and relays the information to Thomas, who usually has about a week to prepare. The parish of approximately 950 registered households has about 40 funerals a year, according to Monsignor Bozzelli.

Since April, Monsignor Bozzelli said there has been a funeral approximately every 10 days.

As the owner of her own business, American Dream Real Estate Services, Thomas able to be flexible in her ministries at St. Bernardine.

"I like to house people with difficult situations," Thomas said, speaking of

homelessness and poor credit situations. “People have poor credit for reasons, but big organizations don’t care about those reasons. ... I do.”

Thomas said she works with people to determine the cause of their problems, which may include the loss of a job, or a medical issue in the family.

“People have real issues, so we’re a second-chance company,” she said. “We will find you a place to live.”

Thomas is also a member of St. Bernardine’s women’s ministry, and is regent for the parish’s court of Catholic Daughters of the Americas. Her 17-year-old son, David Anoma, is active in the parish and is employed there for the summer.

Thomas is a recipient of a Mother Lange Award, presented in February by the archdiocesan Office of Black Catholic Ministries in recognition of her service.

Her lifestyle allows St. Bernardine to be the center of her life. She said she is grateful for the community and her volunteer corps of approximately 40 people, who come when they can. They work with the Hospitality Ministry, which helps to set up and serve the food that the Comfort Food Ministry prepares.

“I want them to feel good when they come because I want them to come back,” she said of the volunteers. “I want them to share the feeling that I get from it – and they do.”

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