



Bishop Hicks' Column

February 2023: Feeding the hungry through our ministries



People are sometimes surprised to hear that I do my own grocery shopping and cook my own meals. I am not a gourmet chef, but I can hold my own in the kitchen. Frankly, it is not that big of a task since I live alone and frequently eat out at meetings, receptions and events. Therefore, most of my trips to the grocery store are a very quick “in and out.”

However, for Christmas day, I invited my family for dinner. Hosting 10 people resulted in a much longer grocery list and time in the store than usual. So as I navigated the aisles filled with a multitude of carts and frantic shoppers on the morning of December 24, it struck me just how much the price of food has gone up. There was a woman standing next to me in the egg section. Suddenly, she blurted out, “Is this really the cost of eggs?!” I turned to her and said, “I think so. It’s unbelievable, right?” With an affirming and exaggerated nodding of her head, she added, “Unbelievable, yes! And outrageous. I have sticker shock!”

With the soaring grocery prices across our nation, hunger is also on the rise. As a Church, we are mandated to not turn a blind eye to those in need. One of the many ways that we put our faith into action is by feeding the hungry. Scripture is clear about the obligation to help those who are less fortunate. Once we have adored and worshiped God, being nourished by the Word and the Eucharist, we are mandated to go out and serve the poor, and not just in abstract ways, but tangibly: “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works?” (James 2:14)

I am proud that we in the Diocese of Joliet take this mandate to heart. Our Catholic Ministries Annual Appeal (CMAA) supports so many ministries, including outreach to the poor and hungry. It helps support Catholic Charities, whose mobile food pantries at parishes and schools throughout the diocese helped more than 26,000 people last year. Catholic Charities also uses these visits to offer resources to other services participants may need.

Additionally, the ministries of mercy advisor from our Department of Catechesis and Evangelization organized

“Christmas Blessing” grants to local parish-based food pantries. The applications submitted by parishes painted a stark yet accurate picture of the struggle to stock pantries in the face of dramatically increasing prices. Yet it was heartening to read of the commitment of parish staff and volunteers to help their faith community and neighbors. Our Catholic schools and religious education programs also contribute to this ministry with donations and service hours. We all work as a family to help our brothers and sisters with a basic need of life.

My aunt and uncle volunteer at their church’s food pantry. They, too, have reported that the number of people requesting food has continued to rise exponentially, and sometimes they are surprised by who is asking for food. Recently, they handed a basket of food to a man who has been a longtime parishioner and pillar of their church. Confused, they assumed he was there to volunteer for the distribution of food, but why was he waiting in the line? Sheepishly, he said to them, “I feel so bad. Over the years, I was the one giving out food, and now I need it myself. With prices skyrocketing, I have come to the point of having to choose between my medication or food. I am embarrassed to admit that I now need this assistance myself.”

Sometimes, we can be tempted to wonder if everyone in the food pantry lines really needs the food they are receiving from us. There might be some people who take advantage of our generosity. Yet, I would rather err on the side of generosity and love than turn away those who are in need. St. Paul boldly challenges us to be generous to all people, even those we might deem undeserving, such as our enemies: “If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink.” (Romans 12:20)

There are so many ways to feed the hungry and help those in need. Whatever way you choose – the CMAA, donations to your parish or local pantry, volunteerism or prayers – to you I say, **“thank you!”** For whenever we put our faith into action, we are following what Jesus teaches in the Gospel: “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.” (Matthew 25:40) †