

Clothing the naked means more than providing shirts and shoes

The weather was turning cold when a woman came into the Holy Family Service Ministry at St. Charles Borromeo Parish in North Hollywood, California. She needed a coat, and she was particular about what she wanted.

“I don’t want to look like a man at night because that can get me in trouble,” she told Deacon Louis Roche, director of the ministry. “And I don’t want to look like a woman at night.” She settled for a drab jacket that would not bring unwanted attention.

“I went with her to see where she lived on the street, and it was unbelievable,” he said. “The rest of us go home at night, and when the sun goes down, that’s when the homeless get started. They have to stay awake to keep watch. Getting through tomorrow is a huge deal for them.”

The center serves about 1,000 individuals and families each month, including migrants and children who come with their parents. Not everyone is homeless. Some are transient, or just poor.

They come for haircuts, food, mental health services, referrals to other resources, and they can clean up in a shower truck. Clothes are distributed in a store-like setting so that it feels like a shopping experience. All of the clothes donated by churches, individuals and groups are free, and guests can get a new set of clothes every week.

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Some are in rough shape, and many of them sleep on the ground

or otherwise can't properly care for their clothes.

"I have seen people sleeping in bushes, or face down in the dirt," Deacon Roche said.

There's more to the ministry than providing services and giving out pants, shirts, ponchos, jackets, socks and shoes.



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"Our volunteers make them feel at home when they come in," he said. "There's a spiritual aspect here, a form of evangelization, and I think that people like that. They often ask for prayers, and we give out rosaries, but we're not over the top. People can use them on their own. On Sundays, we see a lot of them sitting in the back of the church and gradually moving to the front and feeling more comfortable about themselves. People need to feel that they are okay in God's eyes, that they're not outcasts, that they have a purpose in life. They need to feel like they are here for a reason and that they are as important as anyone else."

Some of the people on the streets are in the worst times of their lives. Deacon Roche sees women and children who may be trafficked, and girls who six months later look like they've aged 10 years. There was a young woman eight months pregnant by a drug dealer, and she was still smoking crack. One man for 27 years sat on a bench in front of the center; he fell off one day, bleeding from a head injury, but came back and sat there until he died.

There's so much that the homeless and poor need, and sometimes they just need shoes and some kindness from the staff. Those can be blessings.

"There's not one person who's not spiritual in one way or another," Deacon Roche said. "It's gratifying to see when the light bulb goes on in each person and hear them say, 'Oh, yeah, I feel that and I want that again.' When they come here, they are getting a few minutes of peace and tranquility in their lives knowing that God loves them, that they are loved and that they are alive. I like to provide that sacred space for them so that they can at least be at peace for a certain time here. I think that's comforting for them."

They have given his life purpose, he added, and he's made many new friends and learned a lot about himself and humanity and about empathy.

"I like hearing people's stories, and they want to be heard," he said. "I think that's what being a deacon is about, being a bridge between the Church and humanity, and I take that seriously."

Serving all walks of life

There's not so much a homeless problem in rural America, but, rather, people are just poor. That's so in Frenchville in Clearfield County in the rolling hills of central Pennsylvania.

Life Line of Clearfield serves people in the region who come for assistance with their pregnancies or for their young children. They may need food, household items, baby furniture, car seats or formula.

The women who are usually in their 20s and 30s – sometimes as young as 14 – need maternity clothes to fit throughout their pregnancies. When their babies are born, they need diapers and enough baby clothes to keep up with how often babies have to

be changed, and with how fast they grow. Toddler clothes are available, too.

“Whatever we can get in, we give out,” said center supervisor Sister Ruth Ann Madera. “We get support from foundations, individuals and churches, and the Knights of Columbus are big supporters.”

Life Line also offers counseling, pregnancy tests, emergency food, educational materials and referrals to other programs and resources. The clients come from many different backgrounds, and not all of them are single moms.

“Sometimes you’d think that they’re all unmarried,” Sister Ruth Ann said about the mothers they assist. “But we do have married clients, and we also serve dads. It’s a poverty issue.”

It’s not only mothers who ask for baby clothes and diapers. About a year and a half ago, Life Line started serving grandparents because there’s an increasing number of people raising grandchildren. That’s because their own children – the baby’s parents – have mental health or addiction issues, or might even be in jail.

Life Line comes under the umbrella of Young People Who Care, Inc., that began in 1976 as an organization for youth to serve the needs of the poor. It was founded by the late Sister Therese Dush, a Sister of Mercy from the Diocese of Erie, who in 1982 received permission to found Anawim Religious Community of Frenchville. Their story is one of love for the poor and trust in God to provide the needs of the community and its ministries.

“The name means ‘the little ones who remain faithful to Yahweh,’ and the charism is mainly the beatitudes,” Sister Ruth Ann said. “The Mercies are still like our big sisters.”

She was 26 when she came to Frenchville decades ago to do

mission work with the teenagers.

She had no intentions of joining a religious community. But she did.

“I came here for a week, and that was pretty much it,” she said. “I’m here because that was my spiritual call.”

Now there are two, just her and Sister Suzanne Thibault. Over the years, Bethany Retreat Center on their 150 acres grew to host youth and adult retreats, as well as the Young People Who Care projects. The sisters are also available for spiritual direction and counseling.

There are some paid staff workers plus about 40 Anawim associates helping with various ministries.

“In their secular lives they do their best to live out the charism.” Sister Ruth Ann said. “That’s putting on Jesus and living out the Gospel as we are called to do.”

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