

Setting a Plate for Jesus in North Cape May

By Joanna Gardner

If you're living on public assistance, or welfare, in Cape May County and using temporary housing vouchers from the Board of Social Services to help cover housing expenses, there's a chance you may be living out of a motel.

Although the county is trying to cut back on the trend, many individuals and families that are part of the housing voucher program have traditionally been able to redeem them at one of the many motels in the region that operate as resort lodgings during the summer months. That means for up to 12 months, families could be living out of a single room, with access to only a microwave and fridge — at best — in the way of a kitchen.

For these families, food pantry items just aren't sufficient.

"You don't even have access to a can opener a lot of times," said Cheryl King, coordinator of Catholic Charities' Cape May County Family and Community Services Center, located in Rio Grande.

"A lot of the people who come to us have health problems. Nutrition is also a problem when you have limited access to food or cooking options. Canned foods are not always the way to go."

That's where a new program developed by the Parish of St. John Neumann, North Cape May, in partnership with Catholic Charities' Cape May office fills an important need.

During a standard meeting between pastor, Father Ernest Soprano, and King, the idea came up for a frozen dinner program to meet the needs of the families and individuals living in motels.

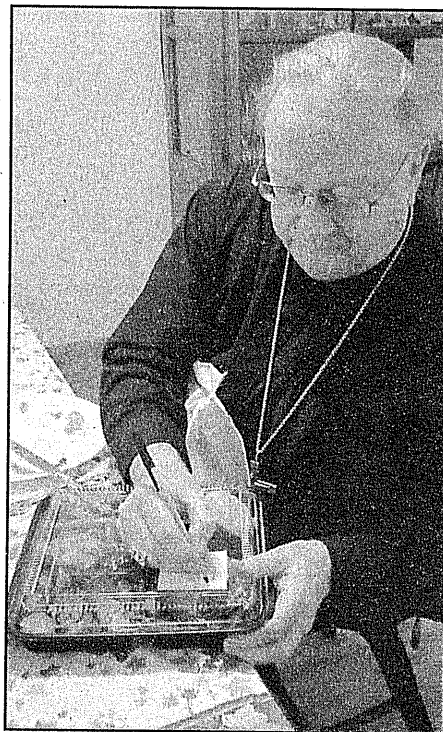
"Everything happened in rapid succession," Father Soprano said.

Using poor box funds, the parish purchased two freezers, one for each of the churches that make up the parish, and microwave-safe, compartmentalized, individual dinner containers.

Students in the parish's CCD program put instructions in the containers and stuck labels, and Father Soprano spoke about the new program at the weekend Masses. In a matter of weeks, "Set a Plate for Jesus" was born.

The idea is that at a family's dinner, one portion of whatever is being eaten gets set aside in one of the containers, labeled with the date and the contents, and frozen. Parishioners can drop off the dinners in the freezers after Mass and pick up a new container.

The initiative was inspired by a similar "Plates for Christ" program in Atlantic City, a partnership between the Catholic Charities' Atlantic City center



Bishop Dennis Sullivan writes a blessing on one of the frozen meals that Catholic Charities will distribute through the "Set a Plate for Jesus" initiative.

and St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Parish in Absecon. For years, the parish has supplied the center with home-cooked frozen dinners that are distributed to needy individuals and families.

On March 14, during St. John Neumann's post-confirmation dinner, Bishop Dennis Sullivan kicked off the program by making the first plate, signing the label with a blessing for whoever would receive the meal.

During Holy Week, a parish volunteer made the first delivery of boxed dinners to Catholic Charities, a total of 40 dinners collected during the program's first week.

"I'm ecstatic," King said. "My prayers were answered. I'm just amazed at how quickly the parish responded. It's such a blessing when the parishes are involved with Catholic Charities. They're helping us extend the hand of Christ in the Diocese of Camden."

"The meals are just beautiful. It's wonderful to think these people without access to a kitchen will have a nutritious meal," she added.

Father Soprano hopes the program will be an ongoing ministry of the parish. The religious education classes will continue to put the boxes together through the end of the school year as part of an ongoing service project.

"The response has been overwhelming. We ran out of containers at the first Mass," Father Soprano said. "Everybody is happy about doing it, and everyone is involved; that's the joy."

See related story on page 10.

He is Risen, Alleluia! He is truly Risen!

Easter, with such wonderful weather made everyone feel like Spring has come. Church attendance swells. Children in Easter clothes; Egg Hunts; Family gatherings for dinner; How blessed we are!

Elsewhere there are droughts, floods and tornados. Churches have been bombed and destroyed because they are Christian. Children suffer from homelessness and hunger. Families are dispersed, some sold into slavery. People all over need our help!

Perhaps, you may we participate in the "Set a Plate for Jesus" Ministry, to feed our local hungry. Perhaps you may want to join in delivering these meals to Catholic Charities in Rio Grande or wish to donate toward the purchase of the containers. Call 884-1656.

There are reasons the Church celebrates fifty (50) days of Easter - there is so much around us Resurrecting because Jesus rose from the dead. We who call ourselves Catholics have promised to conquer sin and evil associated with it - and profess in our works of charity everything that will build up the Kingdom of God.

Alleluia!

Father Soprano

Set a Plate for Jesus

Use the provided container.

From your table, provide a meal for one (1) person.

Fill in the label (what type of meal) and date.

Freeze it until you bring the container to Church.

Freezer provided there.

Catholic Charities in Rio Grande will distribute these single meals that will be micro-waved by those who have no kitchen or facilities. Thank You in Jesus' Name.