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News

Cincinnati bakery rises to help community

ARCHDIOCESE — "The universal spirit of bread is sharing."

That's a line from Panera Bread's website, which defines the company's commitment to the communities it serves. For us, as Catholics, bread takes on significance as part of the eucharistic sacrifice, uniting and nourishing us through the presence of Christ. As a result, the partnership between Panera and local Catholic organizations, which provides donated bread and bakery items to the needy, takes on special meaning.

One of the beneficiaries of the program is Mercy Franciscan at St. John, a social service agency committed to providing emergency services to families and individuals in crisis. Many of the clients served by St. John's reside in Cincinnati's Over-the-Rhine, where the agency operates a food pantry and sandwich window. When the donated product from Panera arrives at St. John's, volunteers help unload and sort it. From there the bread is used to make sandwiches and distributed through the window, which is open seven days a week and serves more than 100 individuals per day with lunch of a sandwich, hot soup (during the cold months), fruit and dessert.

Erika Copeland, executive of director of St. John, expressed the agency's gratitude for the donations and said word of the delicious bread on which the sandwiches are served has spread among their clients in the neighborhood, most of whom are homeless.

"A lot of times, there's a line," she said, adding that loaves of the bread and pastries, along with other groceries, are distributed to needy families through the food pantry.

Among the local volunteers involved in picking up and delivering the bread are members of St. Susanna Parish in Mason. Approximately 25 parishioners are involved in the parish's Operation Bread ministry, one of several outreach efforts at St. Susanna's geared toward serving the needy, said Mike Harrison, who serves as co-chair of the program, along with Jeff Hayek. The volunteers pick up the bread at three different Panera locations after the stores have closed for the night. "They bag it for us, and we deliver it first thing in the morning," he explained. "It sure makes our cars smell nice."

The group, which includes Harrison's wife, Paula, also delivers to other area locations, including the Free Store and Our Daily Bread. "Personally, I find a lot of joy in doing this," he said. "On occasion we take our children, Chase and Brianne, when we pick up the bread and drop it off. The experience exposes them to those in need and the struggles other people have. It's a reminder for all of us to be joyful about the blessings we have, of our call to do more to help others and to put our faith into action." ■



St. Susanna parishioners Chase (left) and Mike Harrison pick up day-end donations from a local Panera bakery-café.

Everyday Evangelists

By Sister Eileen Connelly, OSU

According to Jim Hach, operating partner for Cincinnati- and Dayton-area Panera bakery-cafes, the company initiated its day-end bread program in 1998.

"We do it for two reasons," he explained. "It makes us feel good and is the right thing to do and, because we're a fresh-baked bakery, we always have product left at the end of the day. Instead of throwing it away, we'd rather do something good with it."

So, every night at each of Panera's 16 Cincinnati-area stores, the leftover, but still fresh and delicious breads, bagels, cookies and pastries are boxed up and ready for pick up by local volunteers who then deliver the tasty treats to area food pantries, churches and non-profit organizations. Panera donated one million dollars in product to such groups in its Ohio market in 2006, Hach said, and is always looking for new organizations to become involved.

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