



The Companion

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www.emmauserie.org



Just to live is a blessing.
Just to be is holy.

Abraham Joshua Heschel

From Sister Mary

Dear Friends of Emmaus,

I had to do something recently that I've never done at Emmaus. I had to close the soup kitchen for a day. A fight had broken out the day before and, in addition to a lot of cursing and punch throwing, one of our staff members got pushed against the wall and had to go to the emergency room and get her hand bandaged. We've had skirmishes before at the kitchen, but this went beyond.

There were reasons for this, of course. It was the end of the month and people are desperate—they're waiting for their next check. It was the holiday season and all the agendas of regret and loneliness and "homesickness" surface amid the Christmas carols that blare and the ads that show warm homes and families celebrating. And there are mental illnesses and addictions and relationship disputes and hours walking the streets in the cold before they arrive on the soup kitchen doorstep.

But such behavior is unacceptable at Emmaus—so here's what we did. The day after the fight, the entire staff gathered at the kitchen. We let each person in the door and told them we were closed and why. We gave individuals prepared sandwiches to take with them and families a bag of food.

I expected a lot of anger and bad mouthing and shouting. Only one person was irritated. The other 150 guests that day amazed me. "We're so sorry this happened," they said. One woman burst into tears when she saw that staff member's hand was bandaged. So many told us, "You're doing the right thing, sister. You don't have to put up with that stuff and we don't either." And the most constant response was: "bless you, bless you for all that you do for us."

We were all shocked. We had spent a lot of time preparing ourselves for how to respond to the anger that we anticipated. Instead we were met with kindness and understanding and empathy. What began as a disturbing situation turned into a precious blessing.

The least I can do, then, is pay the blessing forward and share with you all the goodness that I taste and see each day at Emmaus. I love my work. I am surrounded by such beautiful people—benefactors, staff, volunteers and guests—that I feel I am the most blessed person on earth. Thank you for all you do to make the blessings abound.



Sister Mary

Random Acts of Blessing

We bless



Ann Daugherty and guest

It was during the record snowfall in Erie—63 inches in two days. At the entrance of the soup kitchen, Ann Daugherty, one of the volunteers, asked each guest to spread out their arms and stand still while she tenderly brushed snow off them. She also looked them in the eye and engaged them in conversation. “I feel like I’m a rich person walking into a really fancy restaurant and getting the royal treatment before sitting down for my meal,” said one of the men.

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As Marcia Frisina wrapped a scarf she made around Ricky, a regular Emmaus soup kitchen guest, she said a little prayer: “May this scarf bless you and keep you warm.” This was the second prayer Marcia said over this scarf and the 350 others that she made and distributed. “I cut each one out from felt and, as I knotted them, I prayed for the person who would wear it and I thanked God for giving me the means and the idea to do this project,” she explained.



Marcia Frisina and guest, Ricky

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Ellen Gigogne, the first winner of the Lakeside Auto Facebook Pay It Forward campaign, chose to donate the money to Emmaus Ministries. “This is in honor of my brother, Don Metzger,” she said. “Each year before Christmas, he would send a check to Emmaus before he started his shopping for

Ellen Gigogne, Andy Gabler, and Shirley Whaley, Emmaus’ cook



RANDOM ACTS of BLESSING

one another through gestures of care and

the season.” The Pay It Forward campaign is a partnership between Andy Gabler, owner of Lakeside Auto, JET 24, FOX 66, and YourErie.com that creates recurring opportunities for members of the Erie community to win \$300, to pay it forward. Ellen continued. “We don’t want for anything. But I know what it’s like to need some extra help... I used to come to Emmaus when my children were young.”

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Keep your eyes on Nathan Gosner, a sixth-grader at Saint Luke Catholic School. Even though people told him that kids would never share their Trick-or-Treat goodies, he decided to try anyway. Nathan put up flyers at school and encouraged his classmates to share their Halloween candy—one Snickers bar for me, one for Emmaus, one Twix bar for me, one for Emmaus—with those who might not get any at all. Over 100 classmates, including his younger sister Carlie, responded and Nathan proudly delivered 106 pounds of candy to the soup kitchen. Buoyed by his success, he launched a major Christmas cookie drive at the school that, once again, exceeded expectations.



Sister Mary with Carlie and Nathan Gosner

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Agnes McBeth blessed the memory of her late son, Denny Oswalt, by staying involved in the project that he started and funded, an annual summer bus trip for children from the Kids Cafe that included a stop at Payless for new shoes and an afternoon at Splash Lagoon. Agnes, who died in November 2017, “came to Payless every year, including last August,” said Sister Mary Miller. “I can still see her walking up and down the aisles, a child in each hand, carefully selecting a pair of shoes. And she got her grandchildren to do the same.”

Agnes McBeth with event coordinator, Matt Gregoroff, and a child from the Kids Cafe at Payless Shoe Store



Random Acts of Blessing

welcome and respect.

To name a nonprofit “Connecting Hands” means you know something about blessing. Just ask the children at Sister Gus’ Kids Cafe who asked the organization for a new couch and became the recipients of its holiday sale that earned \$6,000. Connecting Hands organizes high-end secondhand sales for nonprofits, the largest being the Christmas event. “I was looking for a couch because ours started to wear down and someone put me in contact with Pam Will, a coordinator of Connecting Hands,” said Stephanie Gear, coordinator of the Kids Cafe. “Not only did she donate a great teal couch and give us the Christmas fundraiser, but the volunteers there are staying in touch. They recognize we have a need and are looking out for us.”



A child and his shopping helper selecting items at the Kids Cafe Christmas store

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The windchill was -4 degrees. Just about right for “Frigid Frolic,” the 13-mile bike around Presque Isle event held annually on New Year’s Day by the Erie Cyclepaths. As part of the event the participants collected hats, scarves and gloves to be shared with Emmaus guests. “We were able to bundle up for our ride and we want everyone to stay warm during Erie’s winters,” said Eric Webber, the organizer, who delivered the items.

Food for the Soul

The seeker whispered “God, speak to me.” And a meadowlark sang. But the seeker did not hear.

So the seeker yelled “God, speak to me!” And the thunder rolled across the sky. But the seeker did not listen.

The seeker looked around and said “God, let me see you.”

And a star shone brightly. But the seeker did not notice.

And the seeker shouted “God, show me a miracle!” And a life was born. But the seeker did not know.

So the seeker cried out in despair “Touch me God and let me know that you are here!” Whereupon God reached down and touched the seeker. But the seeker brushed the butterfly away and walked on.

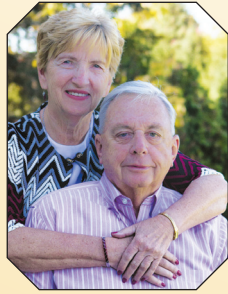
Moral: Don’t miss out on a blessing because it isn’t packaged the way you expect.

—from *The Monastic Way* by Joan Chittister



LIVES of BLESSING

“Just to live is a blessing.



For Evelyn and Dave Seyboldt “just to live” is not only a blessing, it is also a responsibility. For their years of service to the Erie community, they were recently given the Outstanding Philanthropist award by the Association of Fundraising Professionals Northwestern Pennsylvania Chapter. Evy has volunteered at the soup kitchen for over 25 years while Dave has been serving on the Emmaus Board of Directors for over ten years. “I feel blessed to have been given the gift of life,” said Dave, “and I want to do what I can for those around me.” Evy added, “We never know how the smallest act or gesture or word might impact someone’s life.”

Charlene Serfozo, a longtime volunteer at Emmaus soup kitchen, devoted 45 years to Erie L’Arche, a faith-based community where people with and without intellectual and physical disabilities share life together. She was recently honored by them with the Spirit of L’Arche award for her service and care. “Just to share a few minutes in the joys and sufferings of my friends at L’Arche and at the soup kitchen is to stand on holy ground,” she said.



Erie Benedictine sisters Anne McCarthy and Linda Romey were recently appointed to the Emmaus Board of Directors. Both sisters bring a life-long dedication to the poor and to social justice and peace. Sister Anne lives in the Mary the Apostle Catholic Worker community in inner-city Erie where she organizes programs and gardening projects for neighborhood children. She is director of Benetvision and Monasteries of the Heart where one of her responsibilities is forming Benedictine value-based communities for women in transition. Sister Linda is the website developer/designer for the Benedictine Sisters of Erie and many of its ministries, including Emmaus. She spent years living and working with base communities in Colombia,



Sister Anne McCarthy and Sister Linda Romey

South America, and with a Catholic Worker community in Colorado Springs, Colorado that included a soup kitchen outreach. Sister Linda has an advanced degree in business administration.

“Just to be is holy.” – Abraham Joshua Heschel



There are long-time volunteers and then there’s Marty Schaaf who gave over 30 years of service to the soup kitchen and brought many people to volunteer with her along the way. Marty, who passed away in September 2017, was a “classy lady,” said staff member Sister Claire Marie Surmik, “who drove a bright yellow car that signaled what an outgoing and fun-loving person she was.” Marty organized a crew that worked once-a-week at the kitchen and every Thanksgiving joined her good friend, Fr. Bud Yehl, to make enough stuffing to serve 250 guests.

“He made us all a little kinder,” said Sister Lucia Surmik, coordinator of the Emmaus food pantry. She was describing Jim Lieb, a volunteer at the pantry, who died unexpectedly in December 2017. For years Jim and his wife Mary Ellen had volunteered at the soup kitchen, then less than a year ago Jim began driving the food pantry truck. Jim also volunteered at the overflow shelters for the homeless during winter and so he knew a lot of Emmaus guests personally. “He was a friend to everyone at the pantry, but he holds a very special place in my heart,” said Sister Lucia.



In Memory **We are grateful to family members who asked that memorials be made to Emmaus in the names of their deceased loved ones:**

Donald P. Andrews, Sr.
Dorothy (Forgach) Antalek
Virginia Belczyk
Fernanda (Arduini) Bonaminio
Guido (Papa) W. Bucci, Sr.
Dorothy J. Jaworowski Bujalski
Lila Mae “Gump” Hart Buterbaugh
William Basil Demyanovich
Edward Michael Gieza, Jr.
Debra K. Johnson

Jean Grace Conroe King
James F. Lieb
Food Pantry Volunteer
Daniel Angelo Luschini
Agnes R. Long Oswalt McBeth
Anna Mae (Saeger) Meyers
Erma Smith Rhodes
Martha Anne Schaaf
Soup Kitchen Volunteer
Patricia Rosalie (Wilson) Wehrer

Dorothy M. (Bernatowicz) Zielinski

We also remember Emmaus Volunteers:

Norann (Burke) Brugger • Paul Meaden

Thank you for blessing Emmaus over the holidays...

POLISH SHARPSHOOTERS CLUB for donating \$5000 to Emmaus • **KATHIE ROTHROCK** for five cases of fresh oranges and bowls of candy canes • **MERCYHURST EDUCATION DEPARTMENT** for collecting gifts for the Kids Cafe Christmas store • **GE EXEMPT RETIREES (GEER)** for donating gifts for the Kids Cafe Christmas store • **RENIE LOUIS, ST. JUDE CHURCH, AND SAM'S CLUB** for donating two large sheet cakes for the Christmas meal at the soup kitchen • **ST. LUKE CATHOLIC SCHOOL KINDERGARTENERS AND PRESCHOOLERS** for donating homemade pies for the soup kitchen • **EDNA VANBOCKERN** for organizing a collection of gifts from local apartment buildings and **SPORTSMAN'S ATHLETIC CLUB** for the Kids Cafe Christmas store • **MOUNT CALVARY CHURCH** for donating gloves to be handed out as gifts on Christmas day • **PANACHE SALON AND SPA CUSTOMERS AND EMPLOYEES** for donating money and food items during their Christmastime Customer Appreciation Day • **BARB ESPER AND THE ASSUMPTION GREEK ORTHODOX CHURCH** for sponsoring an Emmaus family's Christmas and providing hats and gloves for guests of the soup kitchen • **TIM HOLLAND** for donating Christmas trees to the guests of the food pantry • **OUR LADY OF PEACE SCHOOL** for collecting funds for the Kids Cafe • **CONRAD FAMILY AND THE GREENE FAMILY** who made financial contributions that bought the majority of gifts for



Renie Louis donating a sheet cake for the Christmas meal



Emmaus Board Member, Sister Mary Lou Kownacki, receiving a donation from Shawn McClelland, president of the Polish Sharpshooters Club

the Kids Cafe Christmas store • **ERIE DAY SCHOOL** for donating over 200 gratitude bags filled with toiletries and snacks for guests of Emmaus • **ST. STEPHEN'S NURSERY SCHOOL** for donating personal care products • **NOREEN POCIEJ, MILLCREEK HOSPITAL, AND ACL EMPLOYEES OF THE MILLCREEK COMMUNITY HOSPITAL** for donating hats, socks, and gloves • **STAY-IN-THE-LOOP GROUP AND HAPPY HATTERS GROUP** for donating handmade

hats • **PARISHIONERS AT HOLY CROSS CHURCH IN FAIRVIEW** for donating hats, scarves, and a few new winter coats • **OLIVIA FLAMINIO** and her mother **KATIE FLAMINIO** for bringing "bags of cheer" for soup kitchen guests for the holidays • **JERRY GORNIAK** for collecting donations for Emmaus while selling Christmas trees and bows • **ST. JUDE PARISH** for hosting another successful coat drive for the guests of Emmaus • **LITTLE CAESARS LOVE KITCHEN** truck for providing 90 fresh pizzas to the soup kitchen • **MACDONALD ILLIG LAW FIRM** for donating food, money and warm clothing to Emmaus during their annual Christmas luncheon.



Breanna Mekuly, staff member at Emmaus, receiving a brown bag filled with cash collected during Jerry Gorniak's Christmas tree and bow sale



Students from Erie Day School delivering over 200 gratitude bags to Emmaus

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Christmas at the soup kitchen

SOUP'S ON: An Emmaus Journal

Soup's On: An Emmaus Journal by staff member Breanna Mekuly can be found at www.emmauserie.org

"I adopted my son when he was one month old and I was fifty," a guest of the food pantry told me. "My friends thought I was crazy. 'Why are you adopting a baby with special needs at age 50?' they all asked me. But I'm so happy I did. I love him more than anything and I would never not love him." Then she leaned in closer to me and said softly, "I needed him and he needed me. If I hadn't adopted him, I don't know what would have happened to me. Honestly, I probably would have been dead by now."



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"A lady came and gave me three pomegranates and two pieces of Russian chocolate when I was working at the pantry," said Sister Lucia Surmik, coordinator of the food pantry. "She said 'thank you so much for what you did for me.' I don't even remember what I did! Sometimes the smallest things make the biggest impacts on others. Her gift of thanksgiving did so to me."

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As I walked up to the family's table to serve their drinks, Annie, the seven-year-old girl with round glasses that keep falling down her nose quickly dug into her backpack pocket. Then she raised her closed fist and dropped a piece of candy into my hand. "Thank you so much!" I said, surprised and honored she would share her candy with me. "I wanted to give you something," she responded, "to thank you for serving us a free meal." I am continually shocked by how gracious and thoughtful children are.

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"What we cry about is what we care about," Sister Joan Chittister says. It's embarrassing – in our society where we try to avoid pain and misery at all cost – to cry but sometimes it's impossible to hold back our tears. One of our dear mothers at the soup kitchen tragically passed away this weekend. Sister Karen and I couldn't help but cry when we realized we'll never again see her walk into the family dining room with her children.

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At the end of a phone call, Sister Mary often says "thank you for your goodness." What a blessing to recognize and appreciate another's goodness and to remind the person of that gift they share.

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"Bless you!" many guests say as they leave the kitchen. I appreciate the benediction. But too often I forget to keep this blessing going by saying it back or bestowing it upon another person. When I withhold or forget to pass a blessing on, it ends with me, within me, and benefits no one, not even myself. The guests teach me I must change my ways.

STAFF: Mary Miller, OSB; Margaret Kloecker; Claire Marie Surmik, OSB; Lucia Surmik, OSB; Rosanne Lindal-Hynes, OSB; Rita Scrimanti; Shirley Whaley; Stephanie Grear; Breanna Mekuly; and Karen Oprencok, OSB; Companion Editor, Mary Lou Kownacki, OSB; Layout, Judy Allison



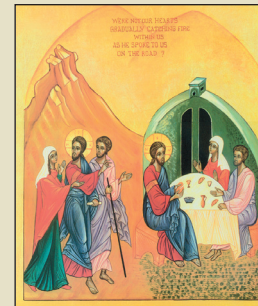
345 East Ninth Street • Erie, PA 16503-1107



www.emmauserie.org

Emmaus Office • 345 East 9th Street • Erie, PA 16503-1107 • (814) 459-8349

EMMAUS ICON
Icon *Road to Emmaus*
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They came to know Christ in the breaking of the bread.

Luke 24:35