



# The Companion

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Is this not a miracle?

## From Sister Val ...



Sister Valerie Luckey,  
Director of Emmaus

Dear Friends,

The whole point of retreats is to slow down, step away from the usual routine, and be more open to hearing God's voice in our lives. But when I went on retreat in Florida earlier this year, I was rushing around indecisively, struggling to force a moment of relaxation. At the end of one day, I was racing to make it to the beach in time to see the sunset, caught up in the urgency of trying to beat the clock.

I made it, running down to the water with the great red ball of the sun just barely above the horizon. But it wasn't the sunset that I had been chasing that stopped me in my tracks; instead, it was the sight of a beautiful blue heron, who also seemed to be having a reverent moment watching the sky herself. Our cover photo in this

issue is one I took of that great heron at sunset.

I can't ever look at a heron without thinking of our beloved Founding Mother, Sister Mary Lou Kownacki, who died three years ago. A lover of life, a poet, a friend to the oppressed, she saw herself in herons, who spend their days alone but return to their rookeries—their communities—each night like good monastics. As I watched the bird watch the sunset with a familiar contemplative gaze, I thought again of Mary Lou and how she experienced life.

We use quotes from Sister Mary Lou and longtime director Sister Mary Miller often, but it's for a good reason beyond our love for them. They left us with wisdom that's as necessary today as ever. In her small book of poetry, *Blue Heron and Thirty-Seven Other Miracles*, Mary Lou made the case that miracles are taking place all the time, everywhere: in the soup kitchen, in the garden, in our minds, in the extraordinary ordinary moments where beauty and hope survive and remind us of God's love. She wrote about thirty-eight seemingly mundane interactions, ending each poem with the challenge, "Is this not a miracle?"

So, this issue of *The Companion* is about miracles, the many miracles that happen at and around and because of Emmaus. It's about relationships, and coincidences, and about awareness. Mostly it's about slowing down enough to realize that just being here is a gift and an opportunity from God. As you read these pieces, ask yourself what's been miraculous in your life lately? Who have you shared it with?

We are so grateful for your prayers and support as we continue to witness miracles, and make more happen ourselves.

In peace,

Sister Val

## Is this not a miracle?

by Liz Allen

*A hungry, hopeful, oppressed crowd, Jesus proved, is the perfect site for a miracle to happen. As the line of people outside Emmaus stretches longer and longer each week, full of men, women, and children like the ones who listened to Christ preach, miracles still happen each day. Sometimes, as it was in the Bible, the miracle is that the food does not run out until everyone has enough. Other days, miracles subtle and obvious abound: a friendship forms between people who might never have met; suffering people find hope and healing; a mysterious guest arrives with a prayer on his lips.*

### Three Sweeteners, One Friendship

Frani Miseyka began volunteering at the soup kitchen two-and-a-half years ago, after retiring as an accountant from Erie's McDonald Illig law firm. Over her years there, the firm had embraced Emmaus, holding food drives, basket auctions, coat collections, and more. In retirement, Frani knew she wanted to get more involved at Emmaus.

"I wanted to be a regular," she said.

Frank is also an Emmaus regular. In the June 2026 issue of *The Companion*, he was described as the soup kitchen elder always ready to welcome other guests, especially newcomers.

A native of Philadelphia, Mississippi, and a devout Christian, Frank moved North from his family's sharecropping farm many years ago to work in Erie factories. After struggling with alcohol for a long time, Frank is sober and living in stable housing.

Frani and Frank hit it off during Frani's weekly volunteer shifts at the soup kitchen.

"Everybody here is a person and everybody deserves someone to talk to and to listen to them," Frani said. "Everyone deserves someone to care for them and to hear their story."



Frani once watched Frank gently encourage a "grumpy guy" to change his attitude. The grouch moved to a different table, then returned and said: "I want to apologize for being like that," Frani recalled. Frank has that kind of sway with people.

Frani Miseyka serves as a volunteer each Wednesday at the soup kitchen.

## Is this not a miracle?

In turn, Frani pays attention to Frank's needs. When she puts a plate of food at his place, so he doesn't have to stand in line on his aging legs, she remembers to bring him a cup of regular coffee, three creams, three pink sweeteners. Frank then drinks one more cup before he departs but that's his limit; he wants to sleep well at night.

In her spare time, Frani enjoys being in her own kitchen. "I bake—a lot!" she said. One day she gave Frank a chocolate pastry. The next day was Frank's birthday; so he saved the dessert that Frani baked. "You are the one that gave me a treat for my birthday," he told her.

Frani also shared this with him: "My dad's name was Frank. You remind me of my dad." In fact, Frani's parents thought she was going to be a boy. "My grandmother called me Little Frankie."

If you ran into Frank and Frani separately as each went about their ordinary day, you might never suspect that they had anything in common. But inside Emmaus, the superficial differences fade. They're two people who have almost the same name, both trying to make the world a little more joyful.

### Ties That Bind

There's something strange about the way time works at Emmaus, especially at Emmaus Food Pantry. Everyone there is busy, the volunteers and the guests alike, and the pantry is only open for four hours a week, Mondays and Tuesdays from 9 to 11 a.m. But somehow, amid the rush of the day and the quickly stacking-up years, there is always time to talk.

Volunteers stand at the front, greeting guests, and showing what's available that morning, rapidly replenishing items as they are packed in shopping bags—cereal, eggs, mac and cheese, snack bars, cans of tuna, canned vegetables, sacks of potatoes, loaves of bread, sometimes there's frozen meat or fresh produce in season.

Guests often chat with each other in line, then with volunteers Pam Eckberg and Debbie Shoup, who know nearly everyone by name. Pam is the intake volunteer; Debbie is the greeter.

Pam and Debbie are attentive to the petite woman who will have part of her colon removed in Pittsburgh to treat diverticulitis. Her health condition leads people to make fun of her, Debbie said, adding, "She needs someone to talk to."



Volunteer Pam Eckberg has welcomed guests at the food pantry for nearly two decades.

## Is this not a miracle?



Volunteer Debbie Shoup  
with a soup kitchen guest

The woman awaiting surgery is like so many who come to the food pantry. “They share their hopes and their dreams, their fears and their sadnesses with us,” said Debbie.

Another woman lost most of her possessions in a house fire. “All she needed from us was a hug and some food,” said Pam. “And a shoulder to lean on,” Debbie added.

Many pantry guests are fitting this trip to Emmaus into a very busy day. Tina, for example, works as a home health aide; her husband is a landscaper. But even with two incomes, there’s not enough money to make ends meet.

Tina is grateful to be able to grow her own tomatoes, with 12 plants she received from the Pay-What-You-

Can Farmers’ Market at East 15th and Parade streets.

After a recent stop at the pantry, she planned to make Italian meatballs for her dad to celebrate his 86th birthday. Her father is blind, with a rescue cat as a companion. He lives just across the way from her, close enough that he can yell if he needs help.

“At any given time, it could be me or another of us on the other side of that table,” Debbie said. In greeting guests by name, that might be “the only kind thing they hear today.”

Pam began volunteering at the pantry 17 years ago, after she lost her husband. “Everybody told me to take a year for myself,” she recalled. But she got bored, called then-director Sister Mary Miller, and “she put me to work,” Pam said.

Debbie followed in the footsteps of her brother, Dennis Oswalt, a good-hearted volunteer who also provided sneakers and trips to Splash Lagoon for kids. “Then his wife died, he passed, and Sister Mary called me. ‘I just need you as a temporary,’” Sister Mary told her. “Twelve years later, here I am.”

In all their years of experience, Pam and Debbie have formed real relationships with the other volunteers and the guests, who sometimes welcome volunteers into their lives just as the volunteers welcome them into Emmaus. “I think the fellowship is really important,” said Pam, mentioning Alex, who needed open heart surgery. He later told the women, “You’re the only ones who thought of me.”

It would be easy to rush through the time at Emmaus Food Pantry without ever getting to know the people around you. But somehow, things slow down enough inside that everyone’s story—their grief, their persistence, their creativity—finds space to be told.

## Is this not a miracle?

### Do Not Forget to Welcome Strangers

Jane Wagner, an Emmaus staff member, was walking her dog on a hot summer morning when she noticed a mysterious stranger kneeling in the grass near the Emmaus offices on East Ninth Street. The man had a walking stick, several bags, and a rosary in hand.

Jane wasn’t sure if she should approach. She was alone, except for Olive, her tiny, long-haired dog. Olive didn’t wait for Jane to make up her mind though, bounding over to lick his face.

The man told Jane he came to Erie by train, attended Mass, and then walked in this direction. The statue of Mary embedded in the wall at a nearby church moved him to pray. “We talked about Erie. I mentioned that Emmaus Soup Kitchen was a few blocks from us,” Jane said.

And then taking a few steps away from the man, she chastised herself, “Jane, did you ask him if needed a meal? If he was hungry? When was the last time he ate?”

She turned back and asked him, and he admitted he was hungry.

When she came back with fruit and chicken alfredo, the man said his name was Joshua and asked to give Jane a scapular.

“I said ‘yes,’ and he put it around my neck, put a cross in my hands, and started praying over me. It was like nothing that had ever happened to me.”

During the lunch hour, Jane saw Joshua on the nearby lawn, asleep. Jane figured it might be the last time she’d see Joshua. After all, he was just passing through Erie.

Several days later, when she arrived at her niece’s wedding in another town, Jane did a doubletake. Who was that man in the pews?

Jane isn’t sure how Joshua, who relied on a walking stick, ended up at a small Catholic church outside the city, 12 miles from where she first met him on Ninth Street. The pastor said he agreed to let Joshua sleep in the church the night before and gave him the OK to attend the nuptials.

After Mass, Jane introduced Joshua to her Aunt Colleen and offered him a small amount of cash for his journey. He was headed south, to the site of a reported

apparition of the Blessed Mother.

Jane credits Joshua with teaching her to truly practice Benedictine hospitality, and to not treat any person as invisible. But she wonders who Joshua was and why they met.

Her Aunt Colleen, who has since passed away, may have had the best explanation. “You know, maybe he’s an angel.”



Jane Wagner greets a guest at the soup kitchen door.

# Food for the Soul

O, the books I read,  
the retreats I made,  
the lectures I attended,  
the beads that passed my fingertips  
to understand  
what Saint Paul meant  
when he told  
the Thessalonians  
to pray without ceasing.

Then  
this morning  
I listened  
—for the first time—  
to the sparrow sing.

*Is this not a miracle?*

Mary Lou Kownacki, OSB



## For the Record

### A GREAT, BIG Congratulations!

Emmaus Volunteer Mary Nelson has been named the 2026 Prophet of Peace by the Benedictine Sisters of Erie. The Prophet of Peace is an award given annually to someone in the local community committed to being a healing presence in our midst and a prophetic witness for peace and justice. Sister Diane Rabe, administrator of the Benedictine Sisters, shared, “We are so grateful to be able to honor Mary as a Prophet of Peace. She is a long-time friend of our Benedictine community and shares our commitment to peace, hospitality, and compassion nurtured by a deep spirituality.” Mary volunteers at the soup kitchen each Friday, offering a peaceful presence and welcoming smile to each guest who comes through the door.



### A GREAT, BIG Thank You!

Yet again Emmaus Ministries received a record amount of support through Erie Gives Day on August 11. The one-day fundraising event organized by the Erie Community Foundation brought Emmaus just over \$170,000 from generous donors.

“We cannot live our mission fully without the kindness of the community around us,” said Sister Valerie Luckey, Emmaus Director. “



## Emmaus Ministries Remembers

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

Virginia (Ginny) Brocki (volunteer)

Jean Marie Lauer

Robert Dzikowski

Rick Marino

Diane Hoover

Dolores (Lorre) McHale Rapp

Eugene (Gene) Humenay

***Emmaus Ministries also remembers our faithful volunteers who have passed away:***

Carl Larese

Larry Schneider

# For the Record

Miracles Abound at Emmaus Grove



Why try to  
explain miracles  
to your kids  
when you can  
just have them  
plant a garden?

Robert Brault



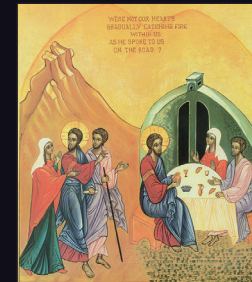
STAFF: Valerie Luckey, OSB; Margaret Kloecker; Catherine Simon; Jane Wagner; Susan Doubet, OSB;  
Jacqueline Sanchez-Small, OSB; Liz Allen; Carly DiFuccia; Tom Hoffmann; Brian Reynolds  
COMPANION STAFF: Valerie Luckey, OSB; Jacqueline Sanchez-Small, OSB; Liz Allen



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They came  
to know Christ  
in the breaking  
of the bread.

Luke 24:35

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