



# The Companion

June 2020  
Vol. 30 No.2

[www.emmauserie.org](http://www.emmauserie.org)

## From Sister Mary . . .

Dear Friends of Emmaus,

I suppose if you asked people on the street, “What is Emmaus?” they would answer, “a place that feeds hungry people for free.” And they’d be right, to a point. But the COVID-19 pandemic gives me an insight into why that response is limited. To be sure, we never miss a day during this pandemic of feeding those who come to the door of both the pantry and the soup kitchen. All through the lock-down Emmaus continues to receive generous donations and to welcome selfless volunteers, all of which we try to acknowledge in this newsletter. So what is lacking?

In a recent interview Pope Francis was asked what you should say to a beggar in the street? The Pope replied, “Hello. How are you?” And he noted that once you ask that question, the person seeking your help immediately knows if you genuinely care about them or if you’re responding with a false charity. They’ll know you are sincere if, after asking the question, you take time to listen, really listen, to the answer.

That’s what the Emmaus family is not able to do during the pandemic. The Emmaus motto is “Bread for the body, care for the soul” and during these quarantine months I feel we are only fulfilling half our mission. We may shout the question, “Hello. How are you?” to the guest who stands six feet away in the pantry or to the guest who reaches out for a packaged hot meal at the kitchen. But we are not able to get close enough to the other to listen for the reply, to sit down with them and talk, to give a comforting touch, to exchange a hug...to do all that you do when you talk to a friend. We miss being the family of Emmaus.

“Hello, how are you?” is as far as we can go during the pandemic. But the question is never enough. It’s the human exchange that comes after the question that determines the integrity of Emmaus. The question for Emmaus is always: In the breaking of the bread do we see each other as we truly are in the sight of God? And do we live out that beatific insight with kindness and largess?

In Peace,

*Sister Mary*



Breanna Mekuly—Emmaus Staff

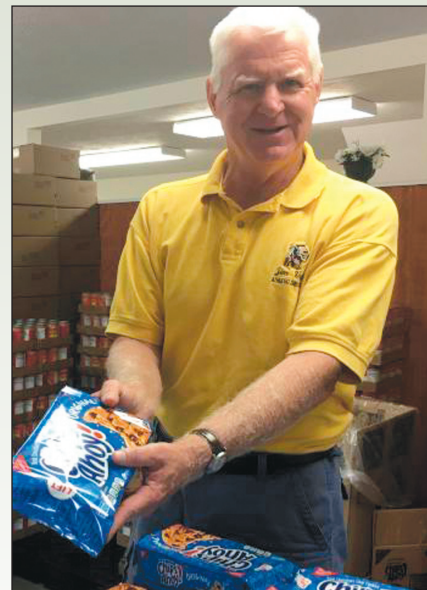
Erie Times News GOERIE

## Volunteering During a Pandemic

Emmaus has never wanted for volunteers. Over 300 volunteers assist at the pantry, Kids Cafe, and soup kitchen on a regular schedule to make sure the hungry of Erie are fed. But what about volunteering during a pandemic when exposure to the homeless brings great risk?

Let's look at what happened at the Emmaus Food Pantry. Sister Lucia Surmik, coordinator of the pantry, contacted all volunteers and encouraged them to stay home if they were at risk or feared jeopardizing loved ones, or had additional responsibilities because children were home all day. "The decision was up to them," she said. "But many felt they could still volunteer."

Debbie Shoup, a long-time volunteer, explained why: "We've gotten to know our people and what they go through in normal times. These added issues and restrictions make their lives even harsher."



Volunteer Jim Vogt

millions of ordinary heroes around the country who serve others without any trumpet flare, but are making an immense difference.



Volunteer Debbie Shoup

Brian Martin, who was loading packed boxes of food on the distribution table added, "I like working here, helping people. It breaks my heart," he said, tearing up, "to see them. The Bible says we should help one another as much as we can."

Many volunteers are like Jim Vogt, a truck driver for the pantry, who saw themselves in a new light, "We are first responders now. People need this food." While volunteer Jean Metzler addressed a personal need, "It gives me a reason to get out of bed in the morning."

In a time of danger and uncertainty, Emmaus volunteers join mil-

## With Gratitude for Sisters Claire and Lucia

"How do you explain Sister Claire and Sister Lucia? I don't know. They're just angels. They're just the sweetest people I ever met." Emmaus Food Pantry volunteer Debbie Shoup summed up Sisters Claire Marie and Lucia Surmik. After thirty-four and thirty-one years, respectively, these biological sisters and Benedictine Sisters have retired from their weekly ministry at the pantry where Sister Lucia served as coordinator.

Not only did the Surmik sisters give generously of themselves, but they built committed relationships—visiting the volunteers and guests during times of celebration, illness and death—and created a loving community at the pantry. "The first time I met Sister Lucia was the day after my husband's funeral. I was dropping off a box of food to the soup kitchen, and she was the warmest person at that particularly difficult time," shared Pam Eckberg, a pantry volunteer. "I needed somebody who was a receiving presence, and she received me. She repeatedly received the guests for who they were, and I always found that very warming."

And it didn't stop there. A commitment to not simply serving others, but serving others with integrity was a hallmark of their long-time weekly presence. Mike Litzinger, another pantry volunteer, said, "Their credo was to do things the right way; they wouldn't do anything that didn't meet some inborn yardstick that measured that what they were doing was a good thing."

It was their spirit that captured those whom they encountered. "Whenever we had our gatherings, they would sing a song in Slovak and everyone could feel their joy," said volunteer Dave Holmes. "They were wonderful people to work for. Everyday was a challenge, but they always found a wonderful way of working through it." Litzinger added, "I loved them both. Well, I still do. I wish them the very best."



Sister Lucia (left) and Sister Claire

# Emmaus Welcomes Catherine Simon



Catherine Simon

Catherine Simon recently assumed the role of Food Pantry and Soup Kitchen Coordinator, a role for which she seems to have been preparing her whole life. Born and raised in Erie, Catherine remembers volunteering at Emmaus Soup Kitchen as early as the age of 8, “I never knew what I wanted to do with my life other than wanting to help others.”

Catherine’s parish family, Church of the Nativity, a Russian Orthodox church on Erie’s Lower East Side, has prepared a monthly meal at Emmaus Soup Kitchen for over 30 years. In addition to growing up next to the church, these experiences have ingrained in her a deep commitment to the poor. “I grew up with the homeless ringing our doorbell every day, throughout the day, for meals, blankets, money. For me it was a normal part of life to see people on their worst days, or others that lived begging and never knowing what the day would bring. I was raised to never question these people and to give what I could.”

The mission of Emmaus and its simple, meaningful motto: “Bread for the body, care for the soul,” centers Catherine as she begins her new ministry. “Even this small slogan resonates as I aim to give something as small as a sandwich to someone, while treating that person with human dignity and remembering that Christ is in us all.”

#### “Fast Facts”:

- Areas of Study: Psychology (Bachelors), Community Counseling (Master’s)
- Favorite Movie: *Moonstruck* and *Sound of Music*
- Favorite Scripture: “If God is for us, who can be against us?” Romans 8:31; and “This is the day our God has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.” Psalm 118:24
- Favorite Book: “I have about 20 on my nightstand! A few that come to mind are: *A Man Called Ove*, *Nightingale*, and *The Giver*.”

# We Remember Barb Esper

July 19, 1952—April 14, 2020

Barb Esper was always a hard act to follow. After she prepared her monthly gourmet meal at the soup kitchen, that was always over the top in quantity and quality (including a homemade smorgasbord for all her volunteers), the staff just shrugged their shoulders and said, “We can’t match it.” “It wasn’t just her meals,” said Sister Mary Miller, director of Emmaus, “It was her whole approach to life. She was a walking definition of an extravagant heart, her generosity was limitless.”



For the past 12 years, Barb Esper, a member of the Assumption Greek Orthodox Church in Erie, brought a group of parish volunteers each month to the kitchen to prepare and serve a meal, and she also organized an extravagant holiday gift drive for soup kitchen guests this past winter. “She was one-of-a-kind,” said Sister Mary. “She isn’t a hard act to follow, she’s an impossible one.”

# Food for the Soul

*A little bit  
of mercy  
makes  
the world  
less cold  
and  
more just.*

Pope Francis

# For the Record

## DONATIONS DURING THE PANDEMIC

“I honestly believe that Erie is a city filled to the brim with generous hearts and this present pandemic is more proof of that,” said Sister Mary Miller, in response to receiving substantial donations from two local organizations and three benefactors, in addition to many smaller, personal contributions.

The Erie Community Foundation presented Emmaus with a \$10,000 grant from its COVID-19 Rapid Response Fund, and the Jewish Community Council of Erie voted to give Emmaus Ministries a \$10,000 donation to help provide food for the needy during this unprecedented crisis. The benefactors wish to remain anonymous.

“Then there’s the widow’s mite,” Sister Mary added. “I walked into the kitchen and on the counter I found a jar filled with dollar bills and coins that someone had dropped off without leaving a name. The donor simply said, ‘God knows my name. You need it.’ And then someone knocked on the soup kitchen door and handed me two plastic grocery bags filled with dollar bills. ‘My loose change,’ he said.”



to work and assist during the pandemic. “Karen approved the program we have in place and advised us to continue it until further notice,” said Sister Mary Miller, director of Emmaus.

## COVID-19 GUIDELINES

Karen Tobin, the former director of Environmental Health Services at the Erie County Department of Health, visited the soup kitchen and pantry to evaluate the food distribution process it adopted during the COVID-19 outbreak and to advise staff on implementing the new state directives regarding the pandemic. Karen, who had retired, was asked to return

## FOOD DISTRIBUTION

When there’s food to go around, give it away. That’s what staff of the Kids Cafe is doing in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. With unused food in the Kids Cafe pantry, Stephanie Grear, coordinator, and Ebony King, staff member, have been visiting families of the children who attend the Kids Cafe to give them extra food not in use with the program temporarily closed.

Stephanie Grear (right) and Ebony King deliver food to families.



## RELIEVE THE LOT OF THE POOR

Spearheaded by Emmaus Ministries board member, Sister Anne McCarthy, OSB, a group of Benedictine Sisters organized to make masks



Staff member Benedictine Sister Valerie Luckey and postulant Jacqueline Sanchez-Small make masks at the monastery

to distribute at the soup kitchen and food pantry. “One of the hardest parts of the pandemic has been feeling like there isn’t much we at the Benedictine monastery can do to safely fulfill St. Benedict’s instruction that ‘you must relieve the lot of the poor.’ Hopefully, the masks can offer a little bit of protection and remind the guests that they are cared about and prayed for,” said Benedictine postulant Jacqueline Sanchez-Small.

# Let Us Give Thanks for . . .



Rebecca Styn delivers Easter bags.

**Tony Stefanelli, owner of Romolo Chocolates** in Erie, for providing jelly beans and marshmallow peeps and his famous chocolate treats for soup kitchen guests during Easter week . . . **Rebecca Styn, owner of Room 33**, a speakeasy and cafe in downtown Erie for preparing 200 Easter bags for guests including a plastic egg that, when opened contained an inspirational message . . . **Al's Awning Shop** for donating masks and elastic ties to make more

. . . **The Knights of Columbus Holy Trinity Council #4123** for organizing its "Forty Cans for Lent" drive that collected over 800 pounds of food for the soup kitchen . . . **All Emmaus volunteers** who serve during the COVID-19 pandemic



## In Memory

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

Joseph J. Desser  
Barbara Cunic Esper,  
Soup Kitchen Volunteer  
Rosemary McCabe Kaveney,  
Kids Cafe Volunteer  
Agnes S. Kaliszewski Kinem

Marie E. Lubelski Kuzmin  
Cynthia Hauser Manna  
Joseph Nies  
Connie Bruno Ratajczak,  
Soup Kitchen Volunteer  
Ronald J. "Ronnie" Sitter

Theresa C. Czupkowski Snyder

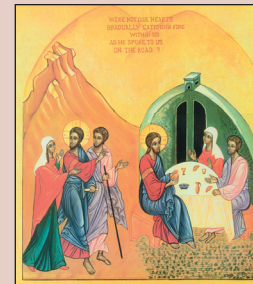
STAFF: Mary Miller, OSB; Margaret Kloecker; Rosanne Lindal-Hynes, OSB; Rita Scrimmer; Shirley Whaley; Stephanie Grear; Breanna Mekuly; Valerie Luckey, OSB; and Catherine Simon; Companion Editor, Mary Lou Kowacki, OSB; Layout, Judy Allison



345 East Ninth Street • Erie, PA 16503-1107

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Icon *Road to Emmaus*  
Iconographer: Sister Marie-Paul, OSB  
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They came to know Christ in the breaking of the bread.

Luke 24:35