

## Sharing ministry 'really in the DNA of the parish'



Laura Baker and husband Matt Baker with their children Maddie, 4, and Lily, 7, join other families at the Family to Family Birthday Giving Project Birthday Bash on Feb. 4. See more photos at [chicagocatholic.com](http://chicagocatholic.com). Karie Angell Luc/Chicago Catholic

### By Michelle Martin

Staff writer

When School Sister of St. Francis Paulanne Held arrived at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Parish in Glenview more than 60 years ago, she didn't know how long she would stay. It's safe to say that the parish didn't know how important the young teaching sister would become to it as well.

Sister Paulanne was honored in 2022 as the parish celebrated the 40th anniversary of the official beginning of its sharing ministry, which she helped launch. The program today includes long-term commitments to four sharing parishes — St. Sabina, St. James (Wabash Avenue), Our Lady of Tepeyac and St. Josephine Bakhita — as well as the Sister Paulanne Needy Families Fund, which helps families in or near OLPH. The program also includes efforts to raise money and participate in international service projects and to help local non-profits and agencies that help people in need.

"The sharing program to me is really in the DNA of the parish," said Father Jerry Boland, Our Lady of Perpetual Help's pastor. "It's just been a remarkable history of engagement of parishioners with our sharing parishes. From the get-go, Sister Paulanne really wanted it to be people-centered. That, indeed, has happened over the years."

It started, Sister Paulanne said, when Father Myles McDonnell was appointed pastor of Our Lady of Perpetual Help in 1971. His previous assignment had been at St. James (Wabash Avenue), and he often preached on the need for those with abundance to give to those in need, and Our Lady of Perpetual Help parishioners began holding food drives for the St. James food pantry.

"We didn't even start on a monthly basis," Sister Paulanne said. "It was maybe twice a year. Then after about two years, people started to get pink sharing envelopes in with their regular envelopes, and they started to use them."

In 1974, Father Michael Pflieger was assigned as a deacon to Our Lady of Perpetual Help — an assignment he did not want, as he would have rather been ministering in the Black community of Chicago. But it was there that he met Sister Paulanne.

"You could collect paper and get money for it then," Pflieger said. "And Sister Paulanne and I would go around in this little Jeep and collect papers. The money she got was what she used to help needy families in the parish."

When Pflieger was ordained the following year, he was assigned to St. Sabina, where he became pastor six years later.

"It was Paulanne and Myles McDonnell who came down and painted my room and helped me move in," he said. "And they said, 'Anything you need, just ask.'"

Since then, OLPH parishioners have provided food and clothing as well as monetary donations, he said. They “adopt” families for the holidays, and they volunteer at the parish and attend parish events, from Masses to the regular Friday night peace walks St. Sabina hosts in the summer.

Cathy Moore, the director of the food pantry at St. James, said Our Lady of Perpetual Help has kept up a similar relationship there, with regular volunteers working in the food pantry and providing generous and consistent donations of food, clothing, money, diapers and toiletries.

“We would not be able to do everything we do in our outreach efforts without them,” said Moore, who first met people from Our Lady of Perpetual Help when she was a food pantry client and volunteer 20 years ago.

The parish looks to meet the specific needs of its sharing partners. Our Lady of Tepeyac, for example, has a girls high school. Last year, 38 young women graduated and headed off to college, each with laundry basket full of things they might need, from sheets to phone chargers, courtesy of the Our Lady of Perpetual Help sharing ministry.

The sharing ministry was officially inaugurated, and the relationships became more formal, in 1982, as Our Lady of Perpetual Help was coming out of the three-year Renew Program, which included small group meetings in parishioners’ homes.

“We were thinking, what do we do with all this energy?” said Betty Collins, now co-chair of the Sharing Ministry. “We began to network, and we began to talk about greater needs and what we could do.”

Our Lady of Perpetual Help now has dozens of ministries, including a 900-member Women’s Club whose members are organized into about 40 guilds, Collins said. Nearly all the ministries contribute in some way to the sharing ministry, with students in the school and religious education program among the most eager contributors.

The parish boasts a “sharing room” in a newer building on the campus that replaced the ramshackle temporary classrooms that once housed donations. Volunteers gather several days a week to sort donations and send them on their way to food pantries, sharing parishes and other organizations. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the volunteers would sort 100,000 cans of food and 10,000 bags of clothing and household goods each year.

Several local funeral homes now suggest the Needy Family Fund as a destination for donations if the families of the bereaved don’t have anything else in mind; it has helped provide resources, and it’s meant there are a lot of thank-you cards to write.

She gets up at 3:30 a.m. to write them, said Sister Paulanne, who retired from full-time teaching several years ago but still has more than enough work to fill the daylight hours.

An Our Lady of Perpetual Help parishioner was behind the



Sister Paulanne Held in the altar area of church during a Mass celebrating the 40th anniversary of the parish’s sharing program on Nov. 26, 2022, at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church in Glenview. See more photos at [chicagocatholic.com](http://chicagocatholic.com). Karie Angell Luc/Chicago Catholic

state of Illinois’s Good Samaritan Bread Law, which makes it possible for bakeries and grocery stores to donate day-old bread to food pantries and other organizations that feed the needy, Sister Paulanne said.

“The longevity of the program is because of the dedication of the parishioners,” Collins said. “They really care.”

That care, Pflieger believes, came from following the example of Sister Paulanne.

“Paulanne had and has a tremendous heart for those who are struggling,” he said. “She takes it very personally. When someone comes to the door and asks for help, she always sees them as a human being and always treats them with the respect and the love and the care they are need in of as well. They are in need of someone who sees them and hears them and feels their pain. ... She is Chicago’s Mother Teresa. She spends her life saying, ‘How can I help more people?’”

That attitude has spread through the parishes, with parishioners developing genuine relationships.

By encouraging Our Lady of Perpetual Help parishioners to visit and volunteer at the sharing parishes, the people they are helping become friends.

“They can think, ‘I might not be able to combat poverty in Chicago, but I can help one family put food on the table this week,’” Boland said. “It’s easy to see ‘the poor’ or ‘people at risk’ as categories, but when you get to know the Smith family, it becomes much more real. Our parishioners are constantly blown over by the resilience and the courage pf a lot of the people they’ve met. It’s all sort of grounded in this vision of walking with one another in our spiritual journey.”

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