

.....2024 Lenten Youth Project..... raises \$26,767 to combat hunger

By Paula Wright Springfield

What an accomplishment! Each year during Lent, Bishop Edward Rice issues a special invitation to all of the children of the diocese to join him in a collaborative work of mercy. Donations are collected and moments of prayer are offered in the Catholic Schools and Parish Schools of Religion to help the poor, the marginalized, or those in need of special assistance during a time of crisis in their life. A specific community organization, in a designated area of the diocese, is chosen as a recipient of the donations collected each year.

For 2024, under the banner theme of "Feeding the Hungry in Southern Missouri," Bishop Rice invited the youth of our diocese to help raise money in support of five different local food pantries as they provide food, clothing, and other necessities to those in need. The food pantries supported by the Lenten Youth Project included:

- **Sacred Heart Food Pantry**—Sacred Heart Parish, Webb City
- **St. Joseph Food Pantry**—St. Joseph Parish, Springfield
- **Eminence Food Harvest Pantry**—St. Sylvester Parish, Eminence
- **Arcadia Valley Food Pantry**—St. Marie du Lac Parish, Ironton
- **Catholic Social Ministries Food Pantry**—a mission of the Cathedral of St. Mary of the Annunciation, Cape Girardeau, and Old St. Vincent Chapel of Ease.

This year, the Lenten Youth Mission of Mercy raised \$26,767 to be divided between these five food pantries that serve those in need within our diocese. In recent weeks, a check in the amount of \$5,353.38 was presented to each of these five designated food pantries.

Donations to food pantries, who mostly operate through volunteer support, continue to be important.

"The monies will be used to supplement our food for this coming month. It has been very, very slim and it has been a little worrisome on how we fulfill things. This donation was huge and will help so much! This donation came at just the perfect time," said Vickie Oberle, **Arcadia Valley Food Pantry (St. Marie du Lac Parish)** serving Iron County. "My kids participate in the collection (Lenten Youth Mission of Mercy), that such a small amount from each kid can build up to be such a huge donation. It really reiterates the fact that any spare change can really make a difference. It is just a



THAT'S A LOT OF PENNIES—Youth in Catholic schools and Parish Schools of Religion got creative to raise money for the Bishop's Lenten Youth Project: youth in Buffalo made and sold homemade dog treats, for example, while others, like these students in St. Vincent de Paul Catholic School, Cape Girardeau, had a penny war with some class competition! The children of the Diocese raised close to \$27,000 to combat hunger in southern Missouri and supply funding to five local food pantries. (The Mirror)

huge, huge, benefit to us. A huge blessing. So unexpected. It was like falling from heaven. The kids did a fantastic job,"

With the combination of increased food costs and the continued growth in the number of families served, the Lenten Youth donations have been deeply appreciated.

"Right now, we are serving around 100 to 150 families a week. We had to cut back where people could only come every other week," said John Wyrsh, a volunteer at St. Joseph Food Pantry, St. Joseph Parish, Springfield. "We are spending roughly \$300 to \$600 a week on food. The donation will help us to purchase food and continue what we are doing. We keep our fingers crossed that the numbers don't go up too much more. Just last week we had 26 new families show up."

Southern Missouri continues to have most of the poorest counties in Missouri: job and health insecurity, and great hunger top the many issues families face.

"Gratitude. Our gratitude is beyond measure for the donation we received from the Catholic Diocese Lenten Youth Mission! We are a small rural community, but our pantry meets the needs of an average of 150 families each month," said Patty Jones, Eminence Food Harvest Pantry, supported by St. Sylvester Catholic Church, Eminence. "We provide food items, health and beauty, paper products, drinks, baby food and diapers. In addition to having a designated distribution date once a month, we provide as well on an 'as needed' basis. Our needs have greatly increased with the influx of off-grid families moving into our area. We are not exclusive to providing to our own local community. We also provide for Winona, Summersville, and Birch Tree. Our greatest benefit of receiving these funds is to be able to purchase more food

and non-food items for our folks. Through Ozark Food Harvest we had approximately 8-10 pages of product to choose from years ago and it has dwindled to 1-2 pages for this past year. With inflation, times have become so tight even for our pantry. Prices have gone up at the main office in Springfield and our monthly allotment of funds does not go as far as it once did. These funds will also help us in maintaining maintenance/repairs on our appliances as well. The greatest blessing we are able to provide as well is the ability to PRAY over our clientele. There are so many needs, and we've had individuals say that they know where they can come for prayer. We meet spiritual as well as food needs. Being servants of our Lord's work is so fulfilling! Thank you greatly for donating to our Pantry and may God Bless you richly in all that you do!"

"We are so very thankful! Such a great thing for the youth to do, it impacts so many people in need. We were stunned by how large the check was," said Jim Keusenkothen, **Catholic Social Ministry Food Pantry, Cape Girardeau**. "With our partnership with the Southeast Missouri Food Bank, that \$5,300 goes a long, long way! Our pantry, especially in the last few years, has seen an increase in the families that are coming. A lot of people are hurt by this inflation. We have seen a lot of people that haven't used a food pantry in their life having to come. We have been signing up a lot of new families, a lot more than we have seen in the past. Right now, from January to August, we are averaging approximately 770 families per month that we serve. That translates into about 2,300 persons a month. The money is very, very much appreciated. It was also awesome to have Bishop Rice here (for the check presentation) on a morning we were open. Everyone enjoyed his presence!" ©TM



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