



Mike Emig of the Center of Jesus the Lord washes the feet of a man in the side yard at the Ozanam Inn on Camp Street.



Photos by Beth Donze | CLARION HERALD

The portable shower head is designed to mix cold and hot water at just the right temperature for foot washing. The service is offered every Sunday.

Following the Master's model

By Beth Donze
Clarion Herald

A scene reminiscent of Holy Thursday plays out every Sunday night in the side yard of Ozanam Inn.

Using liquid soap and a hand-held showerhead, volunteers from the Center of Jesus the Lord – the New Orleans-based worshipping community of about 150 charismatic Catholics – gently wash the feet of the homeless.

The volunteers have been quietly providing the weekly foot-washing service to the homeless since April 2005. In a related effort, called “The Sock Exchange,” the volunteers encourage those who live on the street to hand over their dirty socks in return for a fresh pair.

“The only day we miss is the Sunday before Mardi Gras, when the streets around Ozanam Inn are inaccessible because of the parades,” said Dottie DiBella, co-leader of

the weekly ministry that has operated continuously except for a brief interruption following Katrina. “Somebody has to tell us ‘you cannot get here’ for us not to do it.”

Going to ‘The Wall’

Headquartered on the edge of the French Quarter at 1236 North Rampart St., the Center of Jesus the Lord launched its homeless ministry nine years ago when its Bible study group marked a member’s birthday by taking food to the homeless at “The Wall” – a gathering place at Elysian Fields Avenue and the river. A core group of about 15 center volunteers began taking a hot meal to the location every Monday night and later initiated a service envisioned by Father John Capuci, the center’s director at the time: washing the feet of the marginalized, as modeled by Christ.

“A number of (the homeless) will say to us, ‘This is

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what Jesus did," said DiBella, 54, noting that it takes time for some individuals to get over the stigmas attached to putting their hygiene in the hands of a stranger.

"I guess you're kind of making yourself vulnerable when you actually have someone washing your feet," DiBella said. "I think the homeless are so used to people looking away from them as they come up to people. This is our way to get to know them and for them to get to know us – just to have that conversation with them and get to know their stories."

When the ministry got word in 2008 that The Wall was being closed to make way for the expansion of the riverfront park, it relocated its homeless outreach efforts to the side yard of Ozanam Inn.

Traveling pump

Throughout its humble existence, the foot-washing operation has been made possible by a propane-heated, 30-gallon water tank, outfitted with a solar-powered pump and hoses that mix hot and cold water. The device, housed in a red U-Haul trailer, was invented by center volunteer Gary Schully, nicknamed "MacGyver" for his ability to make anything.

"He actually created the system for us," DiBella said. "We needed the hot water, the cold water and it needed to be running. He was able to cover all our needs."

Father Lance Campo, who replaced Father Capuci as the

center's director in 2008, is available in a private corner of the yard to minister to the homeless men and women throughout the Sunday visits.

"It's these homeless guys who are the blessing to us," DiBella notes. "They don't realize it, but they're actually ministering to us. It's amazing the number of them who know their Scripture. They will talk to you about Jesus; they will talk to you about God. (Working with them) is how I get through my work week," said the volunteer, who works as a supervisor of medical coding at Ochsner.

New socks offered

After each washing, the volunteers dry their clients' feet with disposable shop towels and powder their feet and shoes. Empty pill bottles filled with items such as body wash and shampoo and brand-new socks are available to them at a nearby table.

"When they take off their (old) socks we see how bad their feet are – the blisters, the fungus under the toenails," DiBella said, adding that the ministry would like to resume a service it has lacked for some time – nurses certified to do wound care. Meanwhile, ministry volunteers offer those with foot problems items such as nail clippers and anti-fungal cream.

"A lot of them do have wounds," DiBella said. "They've been to an emergency room, but they haven't necessarily gone back for their follow-up treatment. We see a lot of the swelling of the feet – the edema – and blisters on the

feet because of the walking in the wet shoes, or when it gets hot their feet sweat."

The Sunday ministry's other major service – distribution of a hot meal to as many as 300 people – begins much earlier in the day. After 10:30 a.m. Mass, the volunteers, led by head cook Mike Emig, convene inside the Center of Jesus the Lord's commercial kitchen to assemble a main course, vegetable, dessert and drink. Typical entrees include spaghetti and meat sauce, meatloaf and mashed potatoes, and baked chicken and rice.

"We don't turn anyone away – if they're there, we're going to feed them," DiBella said, noting that the ministry's volunteers give most of their Sunday to the effort. Those receiving the meal include the 30 men serving in Ozanam Inn's Crew Assistance Program; the 125 to 150 homeless men and women who congregate in the yard; and the shelter's 60 to 70 Sunday-night guests. The weekly feeding endeavor costs about \$2,000 each month and is entirely dependent on donations of money and supplies.

Funding just appears

"We never know when the donations are coming, but they always come in at the right time," DiBella said. "I have learned that God is in control, not us. It's not our ministry, it's his." A grant from one of the ministry's benefactors once again will enable the volunteers to offer sno-balls in the yard on summer Sundays, beginning on Easter Sunday.

"Out of the blue this donation came, and I asked, 'Could I please get a sno-ball machine?'" DiBella recalled.

"They thought I was crazy, but they said yes and it has been a big hit every year."

Noting that the homeless are "people, just like you and me," DiBella said the homeless constantly challenge her and her fellow volunteers to put their lives in the hands of the Lord.

"As low as they are in their life – and they're such needy people – their main focus is always God and 'I know God is always going to get me through this,'" she said. "That's how they minister to us. They just have that faith and that belief that their lives are OK and they're going to be OK."

The homeless ministry operated by Center of Jesus the Lord welcomes donations and has a year-round need for new

socks. For more information, call DiBella at 430-1015. The center's Web site is www.centerofjesusthelord.org.

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After the volunteers clean the feet of the homeless with soap and water and check for foot problems, they apply powder and offer new socks.