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Sister Briege: Search for holiness, desire sainthood

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“It’s God’s will that we be saints.”

On a night dedicated to honoring the work of Catholic Charities, Sister of St. Clare Briege McKenna spoke of Catholics’ obligation to serve others not because it is the right thing to do, but because falling in love with Jesus leaves us no other choice.

“We are all servants of the Lord,” she said, and we understand our life as servants once we understand this: “The sacraments are living encounters with Jesus.”

Sister Briege, author of “Miracles Do Happen,” was the guest speaker for the Catholic Foundation’s Northshore Chapter dinner on May 1 at St. Luke the Evangelist Church in Slidell.

A native of Ireland, she spoke of entering the Sisters of St. Clare at age 15, not long after her mother’s death. She spoke of her move to Florida as a young nun to try to ease her suffering from rheumatoid arthritis. And she spoke, most passionately, about the healing power of her encounter with Jesus.

When she was a young sister, she said, she felt emptiness inside. “Wearing the habit is easy; it’s what’s inside that matters. I begged the Lord to meet him,” she said, and as she knelt in prayer with this plea one day, “a hand touched me and power surged through my body.” She was instantly healed of her arthritis.

Even so, she said, the physical healing “was nothing compared to the realization of the resurrection. It was an extraordinary experience of conversion and falling in love with Jesus.”

Since then, she has devoted her life to sharing the healing power of Jesus in the Eucharist, speaking all over the world.

At the Catholic Foundation dinner, she shared her thoughts on how Catholic Charities puts the Lord’s healing power to work.

“There is only one star in Catholic Charities: Jesus,” Sister Briege said. “We are all called to transmit the Gospel through works.”

Multifaceted ministry

Catholic Charities shares the powerful love of Jesus through many works. Archbishop Gregory Aymond praised the work of Catholic Charities on the northshore, specifying a new initiative to help homeless families. Family Promise of St. Tammany Parish is a faith-based program that provides shelter for homeless families while they work to achieve financial independence and permanent housing.

“We need to be aware of the poor and reach out to them,” Archbishop Aymond said. “Family Promise does that, and Catholic Charities does that.”

“Catholic Charities becomes the hands and heart of Christ, reaching out more and more to the poor,” Archbishop Aymond added. “We do this because we are Catholic.”

Catholic Charities provided help and created hope for more than 1,300 families on the northshore last year, said Marianite Sister Marjorie Hebert, executive director of Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New Orleans.

“We serve the poor through the generosity of our benefactors and donors,” Sister Marjorie said, giving credit to the work of the Catholic Foundation, which provides support to all ministries in the archdiocese.

Craig Marinello, regional director of Catholic Charities on the northshore, said he has learned a great deal about the homeless, the poor and the mentally ill of the northshore.

Serving 17 parishes and one mission church, Catholic Charities on the northshore has grown tremendously since its inception in 2010, Marinello said.

The Pastoral Center, located at 69090 Hwy. 190 East Service Road in Covington, is the base for the northshore agency, which offers counseling, case management, prison ministry, a mobile pregnancy unit, a St. Vincent de Paul pharmacy and more.

Marinello also touched on the importance of Family Promise, which began providing overnight lodging to homeless families May 3 at St. Luke.

“We will stand up and say as one, ‘We will not allow 1,400 children to be homeless in St. Tammany Parish.’”

Catholic Charities will continue serving the least of our brothers and sisters, even when things are daunting, he said. Sister Briega agreed there will be challenges when serving others out of love for Jesus. “You have to pray,” she said. “We have to have courage. We have to be witnesses.”

Sometimes it is difficult, she said, but there is no other choice. “You can’t become a saint if you don’t do God’s will,” she said.

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