

Christ Child Society Carries on Its Mission

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SERVING THE CATHOLIC COMMUNITY OF THE ARCHDIOCESE OF MILWAUKEE

December 7, 2017

LOCAL COVERAGE.

CH
catholicherald.org

YOUR COMMUNITY.

VOL. 149 NO. 41 24 PAGES

CATHOLIC HERALD

When Mary Virginia Merrick took a disastrous fall at her family's summer home in the 1880s, she likely did not imagine that her injury and ensuing physical disabilities would benefit needy children throughout the country for decades to come.

Confined to wheelchairs and her bed, Merrick — a devout Catholic and member of a prominent Washington, D.C. family — worried that she would be “useless” in the vineyard of the Lord. So she resolved to do something “every day for the Christ Child,” and began at the age of 16 by making a layette, or pack of clothes, for a local infant living in poverty.

That one action began Merrick's lifetime of service to the poor, which would result in her current cause for canonization as well as the enduring legacy of the Christ Child Society, which she founded in 1887. Its mission was, and remains today, to serve needy children through a variety of means — beginning with seeing the Christ Child in each of them. Its Milwaukee chapter has been devoted to that purpose since its inception in 1948.

Volunteer Pat Gross, a parishioner at St. Charles in Hartland, said she “fell in love” with the society several years ago after her retirement, when she began knitting items for their infant layette distribution program — the society's signature initiative nationwide. The Milwaukee chapter distributed more than 2,000 layettes through partner agencies last year to babies in need.

“I thought how neat; we have these poor people in our own backyard and we're doing something for them,” she said. “I always believed that you need to do things for others. I think that's an important part of life; if you have many gifts you need to share them.”

Today, Christ Child Milwaukee includes almost 300 members, every single one of them unpaid volunteers like Gross. Current president Katie Clark described the group as a devoted circle of friends who are passionate about identifying and fulfilling any and all needs of children in the Milwaukee area.

“We do have fun; I've always said, I have never met a nicer group of ladies,” she said.

The national organization and all its chapters are Catholic, and its Milwaukee meetings are held at parishes throughout the archdiocese — usually in conjunction with a Mass — but members of any faith are welcome to join. There are 6,000 members serving in 19 states throughout the country.

The group is perhaps best-known for its resale shop and boutique at the Merrick Center on the grounds of Our Lady of Good Hope Parish, where it sells gently used or new clothing, upscale gifts, housewares, books, cards, furniture, toys and seasonal items. But the



The All-Saints Parish Choir performed Saturday Dec. 2, at a benefit for the Christ Child Society. (photo: David Bernacchi)

shop really serves to support the society's work, which includes vision screening for children at 18 local parochial schools, library and tutoring programs, “My Stuff bags” full of necessities for child victims of neglect and abuse, and more.

While some programs like the layette distribution can be found in Christ Child chapters throughout the country, the Second Saturday Program is an initiative unique to Milwaukee. Held from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. on the second Saturday of each month from September to May, the program invites all mothers and children, many of whom have received Christ Child layettes, to the basement of All Saints Church.

“We wanted to have contact with some of these people (who receive the layettes) and this was a way of doing that, and helping their children as they start growing,” said Gross. “They come in with the babies, and they're three or four weeks old — and we watch that little baby grow up.”

Organizer Holly Ryan described Second Saturday as a great opportunity for the mothers and grandmothers to have a respite from their demanding lives, and to find fellowship with other moms and support from the society. Volunteers from both Divine Savior Holy Angels High School and Marquette University High School help provide child care.

“We have really lovely families,” said Ryan. “We've become a community.”

Whatever the program, the mission of the society is all about “following the child” through every need he or she might encounter. For instance, when the group made a \$100,000 donation this December to the Gardetto Family Community Dental Clinic at St. Ann's Center for Intergenerational Care — a donation voted on by the membership — it was because of the access provided by the clinic to dental care for disabled children.

Clark, a parishioner at Christ King Parish in Wauwatosa, has been involved with the Christ Child Society for more than 30 years. What she loves about the organization, she said, is the satisfaction of seeing the direct impact of its work.

“The result — we see it. We see the smiling faces. When you're tutoring, we see when the kid gets it. We see when the ladies come into the resale shop and can find great deals, and load up for their families,” she said. “The stories, the people you meet — it's just all so rewarding.”

For more information on Christ Child Society initiatives, membership and events, visit christchildmilwaukee.org. Reprinted by permission. Milwaukee Catholic Herald. December 7, 2017.

