



**CATHOLIC  
HOME  
MISSIONS**

## Diocese of Lexington



Congolese Community  
at Mary Queen of the  
Holy Rosary, Lexington

By Beth Griffin

**Y**ou have to look carefully to find Catholics in some of the 50 counties that make up the Diocese of Lexington in eastern Kentucky. According to Bishop John Stowe, OFM Conv, “Some of our parishes serve entire counties or multiple counties, and the entire Catholic population in some of those counties can be under 30 people.”

Although Catholics are just 3% of the population, he says, “our outreach and services are much larger than the numbers would suggest.”

The diocese encompasses 10 counties in and around the city of Lexington in the prosperous Bluegrass region; Lexington is known as the Horse Capital of the World. The diocese’s other 40 counties are in rural, mountainous, and often breathtakingly beautiful Appalachia,

where jobs are scarce, and 74% of the children live below the federal poverty line.

For more than a century, coal mining employed many people at a living wage. More recently, as coal usage for power generation has decreased, mining jobs have fallen to historic lows.

In an area of stark contrasts and vast distances, the Diocese of Lexington is using Catholic Home Missions grants to sustain and strengthen the faith of its people. Its programs serve those who are needy, both materially and spiritually, regardless of affiliation or denomination.

“The Catholic Church is known for being the church that will help people,” says Dr. Sharon Colton, a family physician in rural Harlan County and a parishioner at Holy Trinity in Harlan. After its elementary school became unsustainable, her parish established a preschool and an after-school learning center and tutoring program in the building. Sharon says the programs are open to all children in the community, regardless of religious affiliation or ability to pay. The parish also offers enrichment courses whose fees subsidize other programs. Holy Trinity’s sprawling campus also hosts a small food pantry and welcomes Boy Scout meetings and soccer practices.

During summer vacations and spring breaks, the parish hosts college, high school, and church volunteer groups that travel to the area to provide home repair services for people in need.

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# Neighbors

ISSUE 3 2019

A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FROM MISSION AMERICA

# FROM THE CHAIRMAN



Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Pope Francis consistently calls us to go out to the margins to share the joy of the Gospel with our brothers and sisters. It is in this

spirit that Catholic Home Missions assists nearly 80 dioceses and eparchies across the United States, supporting local churches in their efforts to build vocations, welcome immigrants, and provide for the basic pastoral and material needs of their often small and widely dispersed flocks.

In this issue, we look at the ways Catholic Home Missions is helping the Diocese of Lexington, Kentucky, address the challenges facing not only its small Catholic population but all who live in the 10 counties surrounding the city of Lexington, as well as another 40 rural Appalachian counties. Here, high unemployment and child poverty, as well as opioid addiction, alcoholism, and environmental pollution from nearby coal mining activities, affect residents of all backgrounds. With support from Catholic Home Missions, Catholic Charities for the Diocese of Lexington collaborates with treatment and recovery programs for people with drug addictions, supports parishes, and helps improve the economies in local communities.

Your support is crucial to helping the residents of the Diocese of Lexington and other mission dioceses across the country that face economic and geographic challenges. Thank you for your contributions and your prayers for our mission dioceses.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Most Reverend W. Shawn McKnight  
Bishop of Jefferson City

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It's easy to imagine a cadre of people providing the extensive outreach services, but Sharon says the parish has only about 30 active families and a weekly Mass attendance of 35 to 50 people. "It's nice to be in a small church where you know everyone. We all visit before and after Mass," she says.

Holy Trinity was the first parish in the diocese to have a parish life director when the position was established more than 30 years ago. (Eight parishes now have parish life directors.) Marjorie Grieshop has been in the post at Holy Trinity for 16 years. Holy Trinity receives sacramental services from a priest who is also the pastor of the two other parishes in the county. One of those, St. Stephen in Cumberland, operates a popular food pantry that feeds several hundred people twice each month. When Marjorie retires this year, a diocesan priest will assume responsibility for all three Harlan County parishes.

Harlan is a remote place, like so many towns in eastern Kentucky. It is the county seat of Harlan County and has fewer than 2,000 people. It is surrounded by mountains and has no public transportation. The nearest city is Kingsport, Tennessee, which takes almost two hours to reach.

Sharon serves at the local medical clinic, which has two sites. She says the distances are a challenge for her patients who must travel for several hours to reach a specialist.

After she graduated from Marquette University in Wisconsin, Sharon arrived in Kentucky to work as a medical technologist and fell in love with the state. She later "resurrected an old dream," in her words, and went to medical school at the University of Louisville. On completing her residency, she settled in Harlan.

Sharon says her faith is animated by her work. "As a family physician, I have an incredible window into people's lives. When you take care of a patient for many years, they trust you. It's sobering and wonderful," she says.

"Sometimes it's not so much the science or medicine as [it is] listening and reassuring. Being given that privilege, sometimes things come from my mouth that didn't come from me," she says, suggesting divine guidance.

Catholics are not well understood in the area, although there is rarely overt hostility, Sharon says. "It's mostly misunderstanding and lack of knowledge."

But sharing a belief in God with her patients can be helpful. "I can be present where they are at in their faith journey and sometimes share my faith in a way that gives them comfort," she says.

Ginny Vicini grew up in a family of 12 children in Lynch, a Harlan County company town built by the U.S. Coal and Coke Company to house its workers. Resurrection, the Catholic parish in town, was built by the coal company, and its generous size reflects a time when Lynch had a population of 10,000 in the 1940s. Today, there are 750 people in Lynch and 10 to 15 families in the parish.



Holy Trinity Parish, Harlan, KY

Ginny is now the executive director of Catholic Charities for the Diocese of Lexington. She says that, despite a dwindling population of Catholics, the rural parishes in the diocese are still recognized as welcoming places for individuals and families in need.

“They do everything in their power, with limited resources, to be present to the community. It’s a testimony that they are not just there to serve the Catholics,” she says. As a result, Catholics are now “invited to the table” to work with other religious groups.

“We need to work together regardless of affiliation because the issues we face are so overwhelming,” Ginny says.

“We are dealing with the diseases of despair: poverty, alcoholism, opioid and other drug abuse. When you ask people living in the rural areas what they need most, they often reply, ‘We need jobs, and we need to get rid of the drugs,’” she says.

“We also have to meet basic human needs. Four or five of our counties do not have clean drinking water, as a result of aging infrastructure and contemporary

coal removal techniques that cause environmental degradation,” Ginny adds.

Catholic Charities has forged partnerships with treatment and recovery programs operated by other organizations. Ginny says, “We don’t need to establish recovery centers, but we’ll collaborate with any entity that is improving the quality of life in all of our mountain areas.”

Sharon also sees the fallout of opioid abuse in her medical practice. She says that the Church is not directly involved in rehabilitation programs, but she and other Catholic medical professionals meet other professionals in an ecumenical group to make sure they are doing everything they can to address current needs and try to avert the next drug crisis.

Ginny states it bluntly: “We are not going to be able to solve poverty and substance abuse in all of eastern Kentucky. We have to narrow our focus and identify what Catholic Charities can do to support parishes and improve the economic outlook for communities.”

“The priests and religious in this area are stressed and need support from people willing to engage,” Ginny adds. “This is not an overnight process. But we could not do any of it without the support we get from Catholic Home Missions. That’s the reality.”

The diocese also welcomes immigrants from Mexico and Central America and refugees from the Congo, and it increasingly helps families whose breadwinners are detained in immigrant enforcement actions.

The joy of the Gospel gives Ginny hope. “There is no way I could ever accept that people have to live in generational poverty. God will just not allow that to continue to happen. We are his vehicles,” she says. “I don’t wear a Catholic Charities nametag, but I know in my heart I am representing everything our Church stands for.” 🌿

## DID YOU KNOW?

- The Diocese of Lexington includes 16,500 square miles in 50 counties of central and eastern Kentucky.
- There are 40,000 Catholics, who represent 3% of the population. In the most rural areas, Catholics make up less than 1%.
- Ten counties of the diocese are in and around the city of Lexington, in an area known as the central Bluegrass region. Forty counties are in the rural area of Central Appalachia.
- Appalachia includes 397 counties in 13 states, from southern New York to northern Georgia and Alabama.
- Lexington is the newest of the four Catholic dioceses in Kentucky. It was established in 1988 from parts of the Archdiocese of Louisville and the Diocese of Covington.
- The diocese has 60 parishes and missions served by 37 diocesan priests, 16 religious order priests, 6 international priests, 12 retired priests, 85 permanent deacons, and 45 women religious.
- Five counties of the diocese do not have a Catholic parish, and 35 counties have only one Catholic church or mission. Nineteen parishes and missions have no resident priest.
- Many priests log more than 35,000 miles annually traveling in cars and trucks through the Appalachian counties of the diocese.
- The diocese administers 13 elementary schools and 2 secondary schools in 12 counties. There are also 12 Catholic hospitals and 7 primary care centers and related health care ministries.



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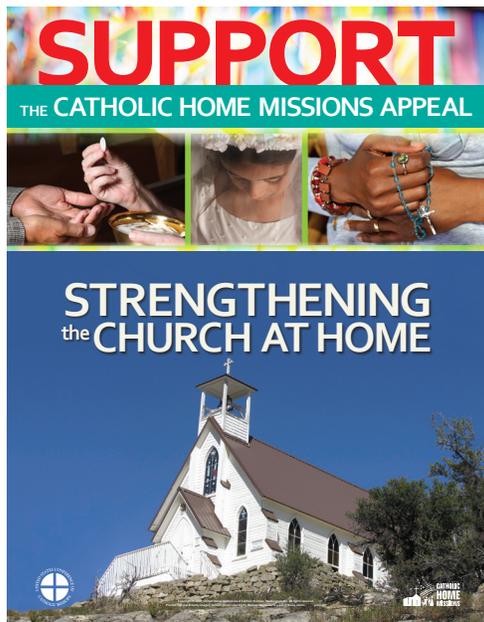
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**ISSUE 3 2019**

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READ ABOUT HOW the Catholic Charities in the Diocese of Lexington is working with local partners to combat poverty and addiction.



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