

AFTER 50 YEARS, HOPE SPRINGS ETERNAL

CATHOLIC CHARITIES SERVES THE MOST VULNERABLE AMONG US

BY MEG WATERS

AS THE DIOCESE OF ORANGE celebrates its 50th anniversary, Catholic Charities also celebrates 50 years as the heart of the diocese's Catholic social services.

In 1975, Catholic Community Agencies was one of the leading providers of hope and resettlement to more than 50,000 Vietnamese refugees who entered the United States via MCAS/El Toro after the fall of Saigon. A year later, the newly named Catholic Charities of Orange County (CCOC) came under the mantle of the newly formed Diocese of Orange. In the five decades since, CCOC has continued to serve the most vulnerable among us with compassion, dignity and faith.

CCOC was established in 1976 by Bishop William Johnson, the first bishop of Orange, but had existed locally under the auspices of the the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. It is one of about 169 organizations across the country, all of which are affiliates of Catholic Charities USA. Each diocese directs the organization to serve the priorities of the local bishop, depending on the needs of the community. In Orange County, those needs have been to serve the poor and powerless and have often stepped up with food, clothing and shelter in times of crisis.

Ellen Roy has been at the helm of CCOC since 2020.

"All Catholic Charities look at their diocese and ask: What are our local needs?" said Roy.

"In Orange County, the most consistent need has been our food pantry; it has always



THE CANTLAY FOOD DISTRIBUTION CENTER LOCATED IN SANTA ANA PROVIDES ESSENTIAL FOOD AND OTHER NECESSITIES TO INDIVIDUALS AND FAMILIES IN NEED. PHOTO COURTESY OF CATHOLIC CHARITIES OF ORANGE COUNTY

been a foundational ministry. In recent years, the scale of need has intensified. After a surge during the COVID-19 pandemic, demand tapered briefly, then began climbing again."

Roy said one of the most striking changes has been the increase in the number of seniors seeking help. Rising food prices, the cost of medicine and the county's high

cost of living have left many older adults struggling to make ends meet.

"Access to free groceries can mean the difference between stability and crisis," shared Roy.

Another enduring ministry of CCOC is immigration support for individuals and families who have a legal path to citizenship, offering citizenship classes, application assistance and DACA renewal support. The goal is to

help people move forward lawfully and with dignity.

According to Roy, "Our most urgent and ambitious work today is in the area of mental health. There is a growing crisis among children and families."

CCOC is currently working in numerous Catholic schools across the county with a focus on reaching chil-

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CATHOLIC CHARITIES OF ORANGE COUNTY WAS ESTABLISHED IN 1976 BY THE FIRST BISHOP OF ORANGE, THE MOST REV. WILLIAM JOHNSON. PHOTOS COURTESY OF CATHOLIC CHARITIES OF ORANGE COUNTY



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dren who are already showing signs of distress, trauma or emotional struggle.

What makes this effort distinctive is its integration of faith and mental health support. CCOC has developed and incorporated a human dignity curriculum into its counseling program, teaching children that every person possesses inherent dignity as given by God. This strong spiritual foundation can be transformative because it helps young people better understand themselves, respect others and find hope in a culture often marked by bullying, family instability, social media pressure and mental health challenges among children at an ever-decreasing age. CCOC's goal is to intervene earlier and expand service to help parents and families.

At its heart, Catholic Charities of Orange County remains what it has always been for 50 years – a visible expression of the Church's mission in action. Whether feeding seniors, assisting newcomers on a path to citizenship or helping children discover their God-given worth, CCOC is rooted in the conviction that every person deserves to be seen, served and loved.

In a word, Catholic Charities of Orange County offers hope. ✚

CATHOLIC CHARITIES OF ORANGE COUNTY STRIVES TO MEET THE NEEDS OF UNDERSERVED INDIVIDUALS AND FAMILIES, ESPECIALLY DURING TIMES OF CRISIS, THROUGH PROGRAMS SUCH AS CLOTHING DRIVES, FOOD PANTRIES, EMERGENCY ASSISTANCE AND OTHER COMMUNITY SUPPORT SERVICES.