

Endowment rooted in Prince of Peace couple's faith

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Nicholas Vacca is leading the way for what he calls “a different avenue” of giving which may allow his parish, Prince of Peace in Chesapeake (POP), and its ministries to operate forever. He heads a committee to establish a parish endowment fund through which an individual or couple makes a bequest in their will for POP.

In general, an endowment fund can be used to support an entity such as a parish, Catholic school or ministry, said Maggie Keenan, director of planned giving for the Catholic Community Foundation of the Diocese of Richmond. She noted that legacy gifts are an “expression of the meaning and significance of an individual’s faith.”

“It’s something that people deeply care about,” she said.

Nicholas and his wife Betty, both passionate about their parish’s perpetuity, made a provision in their will to support the parish.

“I felt that this is my Church. This is where I come, and I pray to the Lord,” he said. “The Church is sacred ground.”

Betty said that parishes in the Pennsylvania cities where they grew up are closing, and she didn’t want that happen to POP.

Keenan said the bequest is usually larger than what one could give during one’s lifetime, and because of the way the endowment fund is han-



Nicholas and Betty Vacca

dled, it enables parishes and ministries to continue for generations.

“It’s a gift that keeps on gifting,” Nicholas said.

While some people think that contributing to an endowment fund is for the well-off, POP pastoral associate Sister Dolores Sabisky, a member of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, said no increment is too small.

All of the bequests for POP are combined and only the income is used, thus creating a “stream” of money and securing the future of the parish and its ministries, Keenan said.

“In giving a gift to your parish, you are leaving a legacy for yourself, for a charity and specifically for our faith,” said Karen Pacomio, parish bookkeeper.

She said the parish’s response to the endowment fund has been “positive and wonderful.” About a dozen individuals and couples have com-

mitted to making provisions in their wills for the parish.

Nicholas and Betty said their parents, parish and Catholic schools instilled and nurtured Christian values in them. Betty said some of those values are “kindness, giving and loving.” Nicholas added that through the years he learned that “knowing the values wasn’t sufficient;” he needed to live by them. Through example, he and his wife strove to show their seven children how to live their faith.

The Vaccas moved to Chesapeake in 1998 after he retired from working 38 years with the Boy Scouts of America as an administrator. Nicholas said the scouting organization meshed with his own values.

Because of his job, the family lived in Virginia, Maryland, Massachusetts and Pennsylvania. Betty, a medical technologist, worked in a hospital at each location and is now retired.

Nicholas said POP is the most “loving, giving and thoughtful parish” to which he has belonged, and parishioners “understand what the Lord means when he says ‘love and be the light in the community.’”

In addition to his work with the endowment fund, Nicholas served on the parish’s finance committee and parish council. He led the establishment of a parish food pantry 10 years ago and continues to be its coordinator. Last year he started an endowment fund specifically for the food pantry, and several memorial

donations have already been placed in the fund.

Betty is also involved in the parish. She helps with the food pantry, taught religious education and was a eucharistic minister.

Before COVID, the food pantry served about 45 people each week. Now the pantry is a “drive through” and serves many more people, peaking at 76 one week in November, Nicholas said.

Historically, the pantry has been more than food distribution. Pre-COVID, recipients socialized with volunteers and other guests over coffee and pastries when they came each week, Nicholas said.

He said he sees each client as “a child of God,” and Betty said she sees Christ in them.

“If you really want to see Christ and be able to touch him, you work in a food pantry, and that will happen,” Nicholas said.

His work with the food pantry has shown him how to love his neighbors, he said, adding that as a child he learned about religion through a book. As an adult, he learned about faith by living it.

“Values aren’t just poured into you. You have to learn these things,” he said. “In the food pantry you are living what you were taught in books.”

Editor’s note: Further information about endowments is available by contacting Maggie Keenan at 804-622-5221 or mkeen@richmonddiocese.org.

Schools

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familiar territory since March, not the least of which has been providing synchronous learning to allow them and students in the classroom and at home to interact in real time.

Ready to go virtual, if needed

Even with in-person learning, all diocesan schools have some form of virtual capability they use on an as-needed basis that may or may not include synchronous learning.

“I can’t stress how much work it takes to pull this off,” said Charlottesville Catholic School principal Michael Riley of the school’s synchronous component. “Doing both in-person and on-screen learning is a challenge. We need to thank teachers when we see them. They are really working hard.”

“For teachers and administrators, this has been one of the hardest years they’ve had in education, but they also feel blessed to have provided in-person instruction,” Lazzara said, adding that she is confident that diocesan schools are prepared to revert to virtual learning if the need arises.

She noted that technology upgrades and schools investing in “a significant amount of equipment” will help with meeting student needs if virtual learning becomes necessary.

All schools are acutely aware of the importance of preparing for what’s to come.

For several years, Peninsula Catholic High School, Newport News, has used Distance Learn-

ing Days to help students and teachers practice virtual learning. This year, parents were required to select either an in-person or virtual option for the first semester. The school had both in-person and virtual students five days a week.

Principal Janine Franklin is even more committed to a well-functioning virtual program since experiencing the abrupt change to online learning last March.

“It taught us a lot of lessons, so we invested in new platforms,” she said.

Enrollments fluctuate

Many diocesan Catholic schools experienced enrollment fluctuations as a result of COVID-19 because parents sought in-person learning or better virtual learning for their children, which may not have been available at public schools.

St. Matthew Catholic School gained a lot of new families but lost students, ending up with a 12% decrease in enrollment.

“Ninety-five percent of those who opted not to come back weren’t feeling comfortable with in-person learning,” said Goldberg.

Charlottesville Catholic School lost 52 students but gained 63, with the majority of losses COVID-related.

“Of the new people, those who came were mostly those who wanted the in-person learning,” Riley said.

Blessed Sacrament-Huguenot School, Powhatan, experienced a 20% increase in enrollment, adding 156 new students.

According to Lazzara, there are a number of diocesan schools at capacity and a number of

schools that have room for additional students as long as they adhere to guidelines for classroom capacity so they don’t over-enroll.

Quality education, safe environment

The diocesan Office of Catholic Schools provided principals and teachers with professional development opportunities so they could receive any needed support associated with their school’s new normal.

Principals strengthened bonds with colleagues in their respective regions and around the diocese, which enabled them to exchange ideas, find new approaches and solutions, and feel supported.

“We may be far removed geographically, but we are not far from the support,” said Schneider, whose school is in the southwest region of the diocese.

Lazzara is in close contact with principals and feels well connected to them. She wants them to know “they are not alone.” She also regularly confers with other Catholic school superintendents in surrounding areas.

“Making sure we continue to provide quality education in a safe environment for faculty, staff and students is my biggest challenge as well as my biggest success,” said Lazzara.

In addition to supporting one another, principals also kept parents updated with communication and transparency, and parents regularly showed their appreciation and gratitude.

“We’re all doing the best we can,” said Goldberg. “We’ve proven what we did worked. We didn’t know that it would.”