Out of the ashes: Franciscans bring rebirth

The Mission of Our Lady of the Angels occupies a well-kept city block in the West Humboldt Park neighborhood of Chicago. Bright flowers line clean sidewalks, and the street that runs between the church, rectory, convent and former school buildings is often bustling with people: those coming to the food pantry and clothes closet and other programs run by the mission, and those coming to help serve.

In the middle of it all are a community of sisters in long brown habits, the Franciscan Sisters of the Eucharist of Chicago, and their founder, Father Bob Lombardo, a Franciscan Friar of the Renewal. The sisters have been joined by two men who are in formation to become the first members of a brother religious community.

Their history is not long: Father Bob, as he is known, arrived in Chicago in 2005 and was charged with finding a way to keep a Catholic presence on the site of the former Our Lady of the Angels Parish, where a horrific school fire took the lives of 92 students and three Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary on Dec. 1, 1958.

Rebirth through religious

The presence is now substantial: The mission offers after-school and summer programs for neighborhood children, weekly distributions from its food pantry and a monthly distribution of fresh meat and produce that feeds more than 1,000 people, a clothes closet, weekly senior programs, and regular community dinners and holiday meals in the church hall.

To make it all happen, it relies on donors and volunteers, including groups of young adults and college students who come
on service trips and retreats, people who work in the trades who donate their labor, and a huge network of Notre Dame alumni, Knights of Malta and other people connected to the church.

Among the earliest volunteers were young people who began to discern a calling to religious life. Father Bob first directed them to other religious communities, but when they came back and said they did not find what they were looking for, he sought and received permission from Cardinal Francis E. George in 2009 to start a live-in discernment community.

“When there is a need, God inspires a particular response to that need,” Father Bob said.

Cardinal George formally issued the decree creating the community, whose life would be centered on the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist and on serving the poor, in September 2010, and in October of that year the first two sisters — Alicia Torres and Kate O’Leary — entered the novitiate.

Sister Kate said she had been discerning her vocation for at least two years before she moved into the discernment community while keeping her job as a nurse, but did not feel called to any of the other communities she visited.

Neighborhood community

Kelly Longstreet, who has lived in the neighborhood for 31 years, said the very presence of the sisters makes the community a better place to live.

“On this block right here, there was a lot of violence going on,” Longstreet said. “When the father and the nuns came back, that changed.”

It changed because of the material help the mission provides – “Look at how many mouths they feed and how many children have
shoes on their feet because of them,” he said — but also because the mission fosters community in ways big and small, formal and informal.

There are the community dinners, where all are welcome, in the church basement.

Mattie Johnson, who turns 86 in September, said those dinners give neighbors a chance to get to know one another.

“We go and we give information and get information from each other,” she said. “And sometimes we learn new ways to go about dealing with people and getting along with them.”

Johnson is a regular participant in the senior group that the mission runs at the Kelly Hall YMCA — created after the mission donated the former parish hall to the YMCA in 2008 — every week. The group has exercise class, Bible study, lunch and sometimes a speaker, and it gives senior citizens a reason to leave their homes and come together.

“The sisters and the two gentlemen who are studying serve us at lunch,” said Johnson, a member of the nearby New Light Missionary Baptist Church. “It’s a wonderful thing. The more we get together and talk to each other about our problems and what we can do as neighbors to help to make it better, that’s a good thing.”

A sisterly influence

The sisters also are a common sight on neighborhood streets, walking in pairs or with one of the mission’s two German shepherds.

“I definitely noticed as soon as we got the habit more people stopping and saying, ‘Hi, Sister,’” Sister Kate said. “I gained an immediate understanding of the importance of witness. There was a different rapport. It was like they understood they could depend on us.”
Sister Jaime Mitchell, who came to the mission in 2013, noticed the same thing when she received her habit.

She said she found the Franciscan Sisters of the Eucharist of Chicago after seeing a video about the community on Imagine Sisters, an online resource for young women discerning a vocation to the religious life, which started in 2012.

“I wanted to be in a community that lived in a poor neighborhood, that lived with the poor,” she said. “And I wanted to be in a community that prayed, especially in adoration.”

Sister Jaime was 35 when she entered and already had a career in the hospitality industry.

“It’s amazing how God gives you everything you wanted, and things you didn’t know you needed,” she said.

Longstreet said the sisters are well-liked in the community, and everyone knows they are not to be bothered.

“If anyone messes with them, they’ll have a lot of people to answer to,” he said.

As the sisters have worked to make their buildings and grounds attractive, they have noticed more of their neighbors doing the same. More people pick up trash in front of their houses, Sister Kate said.

The mission has been able to help, distributing plants and flowers that have been donated to the mission to its neighbors.

The result, Longstreet said, is a neighborhood where people sit on their porches, where they say hello to one another.

“At one point, people stayed inside their houses and it was every man for himself,” he said. “When Father Bob and the sisters came, there was a big change.”
God always provides

Father Bob said it would be wrong to talk only about the ways the mission gives to the neighborhood. Rather the mission — including those who donate and volunteer — and residents of the neighborhood are connected as one community, walking together.

“It’s given us an opportunity to share our faith, and for the neighbors to share their faith with us,” Father Bob said. “And it allows not just our neighbors but the whole city [to] see a positive side of the Catholic Church. That gives good witness in a day and age when people are more interested in witness than in dogma.”

Sister Theresa Torres (no relation to Sister Alicia Torres) is a novice who was introduced to the community on an immersion trip when she was a college student in Montana. Much like Sister Jaime, she was attracted by the opportunity to accompany the people she serves.

“One thing I noticed was that at night, I heard everything in the neighborhood,” she said. “I heard what the neighbors heard: music, children playing, ice cream trucks. We and the poor are not in two different boats. We’re all in the same boat.”

Nighttime noises in West Humboldt Park still include gunfire from time to time; homicide trackers count 14 killings in the wider Humboldt Park community area in the first eight months of 2018. But Longstreet said violent crime is not as common in the area immediately surrounding the mission.

The sisters said they learn every day to trust in God. “We know that God is with us and he will lead us and give us what we need,” Sister Kate said.

“God uses that to help us grow,” Sister Jaime said. “It helps us grow in charity and generosity, and it keeps us grounded.
and rooted.”

Asked for an example of the way God provides, Sister Theresa said:

“Last Tuesday I was getting ready for our food pantry, and it was the first week this summer we didn’t have a service group in. Everyone else was busy somewhere else, and I was looking at these piles of bread and other food, and everything had to be organized. And I didn’t think there was any way I would be able to do it by the time we opened. So I said, ‘God, I don’t know how I can do this. Help me.’ And not five minutes later, a group of kids who will be leaving for college in the fall — people who did a service week here earlier this summer — walked in and said, ‘What can we do?’ I was like, ‘Wow. Thank you, God.’”

Michelle Martin writes from Illinois.