

Butch and Doris Boivin's love for Christ extends to helping others at the Food Pantry

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NEW BEDFORD — The smiles on the faces of those sitting on a granite ledge outside St. Anthony of Padua Church speak volumes. They are among countless poor and needy who come to the downstairs parish center every Thursday to collect bags of groceries or sort through clothing as part of the parish's weekly food pantry charitable effort.

Not surprisingly, the group of volunteers inside appears just as happy to be on the giving end. They laugh and joke with each other before taking a moment for prayer just prior to the doors opening at noon. One of the couples responsible for this weekly endeavor, longtime parishioners Doris and Ronald "Butch" Boivin, beam like proud parents on the sidelines as everything clicks into place.

For the past few years, the Boivins have been a guiding force behind the parish's weekly food pantry — a nearly full-time effort which Doris has dubbed their "second career."

"Some of these people are out there at 7 in the morning, because they come in and sign up and get a number so they can be the first in line to get the best stuff we have — because, let's face it, we run out of stuff — so they get their number and then they leave and come back at noon," Doris said. "We're in here about 8:30 or 9 in the morning because we have to bag everything.

The doors open at noon and close at 1:30 p.m., but we're never out of here before 2:30 or 3 p.m., because we have to clean up afterwards."

The food pantry provides much more than just bags of provisions; it also offers a variety of used clothing items that have been collected through the parish and other area churches, along with a regular luncheon which has become quite popular in the winter months. But this once-a-week, barely two hour event entails hours of behind-the-scenes work, most of which is done courtesy of Doris and Butch.

"There's a Nissen Bakery in Wareham and I go there maybe every three weeks and get pastry, that's given as part of the luncheon," Doris said. "Four nights a week we go to another local bakery that donates bread which we put in the freezer. We also go once a week to Taunton, New Bedford or Boston to pick up groceries."

The couple even recently purchased a trailer out of their own money to make the various supply pickups. "We needed

something to pick up food, so we went out and bought a trailer," Doris said.

Butch said last week they picked up about 8,600 pounds of food in the new vehicle. Given that they get about 250 people a week, on average, it's always good to be prepared.

"The first of the month, the numbers are usually down because they get their checks," he said. "By the end of the month we've had as many as 325 people."

Since retiring in 2001 from his job as a glazier with Local 1333 out of Providence, Butch has become more involved in parish activities — as a daily communicant, working



as a volunteer maintenance and repairman on the parish's Building Committee, and assisting Doris with Wednesday night Bingo games. When Doris retired three years later from her position with Honeywell International in Rhode Island, the couple decided to devote much of their time to the food pantry.

"We worked out of town all of our lives," Doris said. "So we'd leave early in the morning and get home late at night. We never had time to volunteer before. Now that we're retired, this is our second job and we love it. We're always helping people in need. It's just a pleasure. If you can save just one life — and I've seen three people since I've been here who've turned their lives around — it's worth it."

When asked what he gets out of doing all this charitable work, Butch doesn't hesitate to answer with a smile: "satisfaction."

"It's our time to give back," he added.

"Doris and Butch are both Catholics who, like Christ, give unselfishly without counting the costs," said Father Roger J. Landry, pastor of St. Anthony of Padua. "It first started with their willingness to commit an enormous amount of time to serve the poor on

Thursdays at the food pantry. Then it included sacrificing a lot of time to make several food runs to Boston, Taunton and various generous vendors around New Bedford each week. They recruit family members and friends and even first-time acquaintances to come help out. The food pantry would never be able to serve 300 families a week without their truly heroic commitment."

"God needs a helping hand," Doris said. "He can't do it all by himself. He needs people like us. We go after the retirees and we tell them: 'See how much fun we're having?' We tell jokes and we're in a good mood and we're happy doing this work in God's house."

On this particular Thursday, many of the volunteers that Doris and Butch have recruited are scurrying about the parish center wearing bright green T-shirts emblazoned with the food pantry's logo busily doing God's work.

"We're very fortunate with the volunteers we have," Doris said. "We've even got Butch's sister and brother-in-law involved."

The army of volunteers is not restricted to St. Anthony's parishioners, either. "They come from Our Lady of Fatima, St. Joseph's, even from Dartmouth," Butch said.

"We have one volunteer who told us she is so happy we got her involved," Doris said. "She said she feels like she has a purpose in life now."

As a new member of the Knights of Columbus, Butch is also able to tap into that resource to help out as needed. Doris noted that fellow K of C members have been very generous in assisting them with loading and unloading the food for the pantry. "Sometimes it's hard to get people to come during the workday," she said. "We're all

retirees. We each spend about 40 hours a week here, on average."

But despite the long hours, Doris admitted she feels lost when she isn't busy with one of her many Church-related activities.

"If we don't come here for a day or two, eventually we say to each other: 'OK, I think we'll go to the church. There must be something we can do,'" she said. "It just mushrooms ... once you get inside the doors, you see so much that needs to be done, so many people who need help."

"They're both witnesses that not only can one person make a difference, but the incredible difference one couple in love with each other, with God, and with others can make for hundreds of poor families and for a parish," Father Landry said.

Doris urged those who have some spare time to consider helping in their effort, or any similar charitable work being done in their own parish. "Don't just sit there and watch television — give yourself to your church," she said. "They need you, and they need you desperately. It's all about helping people, it really is."

"It's all about being here," Butch added, gesturing to the busy group of volunteers around him. "I don't know how else to put it."