



## FATHER BOB LOMBARDO AND THE SISTERS

BY BEN RAHIMI

***“Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.”***

(Romans 5:20) This statement in Paul’s letter to the Romans beautifully sets the stage for the work being done on Chicago’s West Side in the Humboldt Park neighborhood. Standing amidst abject poverty, gang violence, rampant unemployment, lack of educational opportunity and the sadness of broken families, the mission of Our Lady of the Angels stands out as a beacon of grace in a seemingly bleak situation. The work of the Franciscans of the Eucharist, spearheaded by Rev. Bob Lombardo, serves as an example of what can be accomplished by abandoning one’s self to living out the Gospel message. However, before speaking of the wonderful personalities who serve this neighborhood, it is crucial to have some background information on this old and storied parish.

Established as a parish in 1894 to serve the growing Irish population, Our Lady of the Angels experienced a roughly 60-year period of growth and bliss from its inception. However, this period of growth ended in tragedy when, on December 1, 1958, a fiery blaze consumed the school and took the lives of 92 students and three sisters working at the school. Sadly, dependence on illegal forms of employment, such as the drug trade and human trafficking, became embedded on the streets of Humboldt Park and continue to plague the area to this day. It was to this neighborhood that Cardinal Francis George called Father Lombardo to serve the people of God.

The priest sitting in front of me is not an imperious figure, by any means. Unassuming in both appearance and demeanor, Father Lombardo is quick to end any self-referential conversation. Educated at Notre Dame as an accountant, Father Lombardo first worked in the corporate world at Price Waterhouse, now Price Waterhouse Cooper, a leading global accounting firm. “God’s call comes first” is his response when asked about leaving a lucrative career in public accounting for religious life. Father Lombardo clearly has lived by this ideal as he has followed

God's call from the streets of Bolivia and Honduras to Manhattan's Lower East Side in an effort to serve God's people.

In 2005, Cardinal Francis George called Father Lombardo to come to Chicago in the hopes of starting a mission to serve the destitute, as well as evangelize and maintain a Catholic presence in the Humboldt Park neighborhood. In the eight short years since Father Lombardo's arrival, he has renovated several previously uninhabitable buildings and started a ministry that serves 700 families a month with food, clothing, tutoring programs, after-school activities, Bible studies and retreats. Surely, with this massive undertaking, becoming overstressed must have been a worrisome possibility. However, Father Lombardo admits that he enjoys a good challenge and stated, "I don't have time to worry; that's above my pay grade." Then, with a happy sigh he continues, "The older you get, the more you realize it's not my problem, it is God's problem."

When asked about the role of Our Lady of the Angels in the New Evangelization, Father Lombardo is quick to point to the example of our current pontiff, Pope Francis. "Pope Francis is helping us to understand what the New Evangelization is. Our witness, our living out the call of the Gospel, is a part of this understanding." He added that in order to effectively evangelize, it is important to leave your soap box at home: "It is the simple and

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polite interaction that builds a bridge."

However, Father Lombardo is not alone in his endeavor to bring the light of the faith to the inner city. He has with him the Sisters of the Franciscans of the Eucharist. Sisters Kate, Alicia and Stephanie, in addition to their work at Our Lady of the Angels, attend classes at Mundelein Seminary, working towards degrees that will accredit them to teach at schools and in other catechetical programs. From military families to local Chicagoans, these women are a testament to the attractiveness of a life dedicated to serving the poor and spreading the Gospel with joy. When asked about their attraction to Father Lombardo's work and the Franciscans of the Eucharist, Sister Alicia speaks for the group when she says, "The priority of the Eucharist and the idea that everything flows from the Eucharist was an attraction. Of course, living amongst the poor was also integral." From prepping meals and helping at local parishes to leading Bible studies/camps and hosting big neighborhood block parties, these wonderful women give of themselves completely to living the Gospel message. Sister Kate, referred to as "Secret Momma" by the children, spoke of the importance of "pulling people out of their homes to come together as a community. Spending time in a relational way is lacking in these people's lives and we can provide that."

Unsurprisingly, we seminarians, too, have fallen in love with the mission of Our Lady of the Angels and the Franciscans of the Eucharist. Sister Alicia sees the relation between the sisters and the seminarians

as a complementary one: "We are affirmed in our vocations as a result of seeing the seminarians love for those around them and their willingness to support us in our work and our own vocations with both their time and prayers." It is not an odd sight to find seminarians spending a weekend at Our Lady of the Angels helping distribute food or working with youth. Many of the seminarians find that it is an excellent opportunity to go out into the world and serve after a long week of studies. One of the highlights of cooperation between the sisters and the seminarians is their involvement in the Chicago Marathon. Seminarians such as Radley Alcantara and Kyle Manno not only helped with fundraising for the mission, but actually ran the marathon with other volunteers and Sister Stephanie.

The work being done at Our Lady of the Angels is indispensable to the Chicagoland area. The sisters and Father Lombardo are not preoccupied with grandiose visions of what "might be," but, instead, focus on the work ahead. Father Lombardo perhaps summarizes this focus best: "I'm here to take care of people in need and to faithfully preach the Gospel. When I'm done with that at the end of the day, my head hits the pillow and I sleep well knowing God is in charge." This simple and unassuming dedication to living out the Gospel in the midst of a neighborhood wounded by the sins of poverty, violence and broken homes is a testament to that abiding truth: where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more. ■