

**DIOCESAN NEWS** ([HTTPS://THETABLET.ORG/CATEGORY/DIOCESAN-NEWS/](https://thetablet.org/category/diocesan-news/))

## Octogenarians Day of Service in Bayside Showcases Volunteerism

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By Bill Miller (<https://thetablet.org/author/billmiller/>)



Pat Finlay pulled on work gloves and grabbed a handful of gardening tools before dropping to the sidewalk to clean out flower beds at Fort Totten's historic Officer's Club. "I may not get back up!" she joked. Don Fletcher (right), another parishioner, joined the crew. (Photos: Bill Miller)

**BAYSIDE** — When Father Robert Whelan, pastor of Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament, rallied his parish to celebrate its feast day with community service, the members responded without hesitation.

Fifty volunteers, ages 11 to 88, on Saturday, May 14, donned blue St. Vincent De Paul Society t-shirts and fanned out across the parish grounds and at two other locations.

Their tasks included sprucing up flower beds, reorganizing food pantries, and purging storage closets of clutter, to name a few.

The older volunteers have been answering these calls for more than six decades. Father Whelan explained that is because corporal acts of mercy feed the heritage of OLBS, a Bayside, Queens institution since 1930.

"It's an older parish," the pastor said. "And these are people who, if I say, 'I need you,' they're here." (<https://thetablet.org/queens-parishioners-go-on-mission-to-nicaragua/>)

This Parish Day of Service had been a goal since 2020, but was postponed because of the pandemic, said Sister Nora Gatto, pastoral associate. It was held on the 14th because that was the closest Saturday to the parish feast day — May 13.

The May 14 crew included Pat Finlay, Jean Sessa, Maureen Logan, and Neal and Barbara O'Keefe. Now in their 80s, these parishioners have been friends for nearly 50 years.

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A photograph of three children in school uniforms. One child is wearing a yellow hard hat and holding a pencil. Another child is holding a teddy bear. A third child is looking at a book.

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Finlay said she learned about service from her parents who were Irish immigrants facing tough times of their own during her childhood in the Bronx.

"They've always given back, even though they had nothing," Finlay said. "I remember having nothing as a kid. And I mean nothing. But my mother was still sending a couple of dollars every single month to her sister in Ireland who had even less.

"So we were always taught to be givers and receivers. We all go through life on both ends of that stick."

Finlay, an OLBS member for 51 years, joined other volunteers in clearing flower beds outside the castle-like Officer's Club at nearby Fort Totten.



*Jean Sessa (second from left) consults with fellow members of Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament in Bayside before their Parish Day of Service on May 14. Sessa and a few other members have been volunteering at their parish for more than 60 years. (Photo: Sister Donna Smith, OLBS)*

The fort, now owned by the city of New York, was an army base starting in the mid-1800s. Its present-day managers were glad to get volunteer help from OLBS.

Later, Finlay described her life struggling to make ends meet as a single mother raising three daughters.

"I've received plenty," Finlay said of those lean years. "Father Bob always says, 'Give of your time, your talents, and your treasure.' Now is the time to give back."

Inside the Officer's Club, Logan was busy folding table linens and sorting flatware for future events at the historic building. With her husband, Martin, Logan raised five children in the parish, which they joined soon after they married 61 years ago.

Over the years, she chaperoned countless youth events, directed the parish CYO program, and later became a secretary at St. Francis Prep's guidance

department.

"I just enjoy doing it," Logan said. "It's paying it forward, to give back. And it keeps me young. At least that's what I keep telling myself, with every ache and pain!"

Sessa and her daughter, Kathleen, were part of the five-member group sent to help out at their sister parish, St. Kevin, about a mile away in Flushing.

There, they helped reorganize the shelves for that parish's food pantry, "The Market," which happily accepted the help.

Sessa and her husband, Michael, also raised five children in OLBS, where they've been members for 65 years. *The Tablet* reached her by phone the afternoon before the Parish Day of Service.

"I have my shirt ironed and, on a hanger, ready to go," she exclaimed. "My husband thinks I'm nuts! But be that as it may, I'm just looking forward to it. I'll be doing something to help young parents feed their children, or for senior citizens to get a decent meal. What's better than that?"

Sessa said the parish leadership makes it easy to volunteer.

"We have a wonderful pastor," Sessa said. "When he asks for something it's very difficult to refuse. He's such a good man and a good priest. But we're all still able to do a little bit."

The O'Keefes gave their service back at OLBS, helping to serve breakfast and lunch to fellow volunteers and cleaning in the kitchen. They have been retired for many years, according to Barbara, and have belonged to the parish for 48 years.

"Actually, retirement gave us the time and incentive to become more involved in parish activity," she said. "The rewards are feeling useful, knowing we're meeting a need — and getting to know and work with some amazing fellow parishioners and clergy."

**Father Whalen recalled how last year, the parish wrapped a "90 Ways of Giving Back" initiative to help celebrate its nine decades of serving Bayside. (<https://thetablet.org/bayside-parish-celebrates-90-years-with-giving-back>)** This program replaced plans for a dinner and dance that were canceled because of the pandemic.

"Maybe that was the seedbed for thinking about this Day of Service," Father Whalen said.

Next year, he added, the feast day will coincide with a Saturday, which might draw even more participation.

"I'm thrilled," he said of the May 14 event. "We have a big block of property — just the outdoor work is a lot. But as you can see, there's great enthusiasm, and people really worked hard.

"They did tremendous work."

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