

TONY'S CAFÉ, ST ANTHONY'S PARISH GLENHUNTLY

Tony's Cafe has been offering a free meal for the last eight years to anyone who is lonely, in financial difficulties, homeless or just seeking a safe cheap place to eat. Tony's Cafe began when the office staff at St Anthony's Parish noticed that people coming to the parish door were asking for food rather than money.

We prayed about this and soon bought some non-perishable food and made up food parcels. After a month or so, we thought that God was asking us to somehow put on a meal for those in need. Father Diamond the Parish Priest agreed with this, on the condition that it would not cost the parish anything, but he allowed us to use parish facilities - a small hall, a large hall and the kitchen.

At Mass that weekend we explained to the parishioners that we were going to try for one month to offer a meal to those in need. We asked if parishioners could help us by cooking a casserole for 5 to 6 people once a week over the next four weeks. We would supply the vegetables to go with it, a dessert and tea and coffee. We asked everyone who couldn't cook or wasn't able to help if they could please pray for the success of the Café. We put a note in our parish newsletter explaining what we were trying to do, then we put the matter in God's hands, praying for his help and generosity, while we organised our side of it.

After Mass five families offered to cook each week. With this, we had enough food for 25 guests. Fifteen people offered to come and help on the night, while other people gave us donations of food and money.

We wanted the Cafe to feel like a large warm family environment where people could feel welcome and comfortable, gradually getting to know each other and offering each other friendship and equality, recognising that we are all loved by God who tells us to love one another. This is what all who work at Tony's Cafe are called to do. We are there to love, serve and respect one another, this means not criticising others but accepting that we are all different. It is amazing that God loves us, so we can make the effort to love each other.

The first week we had nine guests and 15 helpers. We sat down together and got to know each other. After four weeks of this, we asked our helpers and guests whether we should continue with the dinner. It was voted a great success by everyone and we decided that we would every Thursday night from 5 PM to 7 PM.

Some of the guests arrive about 3:30 PM to read the paper and chat with each other. This really cemented the idea of the dinner bringing bringing people together and feeling welcome. We grew to 25 guests, with the same 15 helpers who wanted to keep on helping offering to help cook meals. We are now up to 80 guests every Thursday night.

Our main funds come from a grant which we apply for each year from Glen Eira Council.

We have been running a Christmas Day dinner for 26 years and have gradually accumulated a great deal of crockery that enables us to cater for up to 250 people.

We receive some food from the Foodbank in Yarraville each week where we get fruit and vegetables tinned fruit, sausages, milk, bread and so on, most of which is free, while some things come at a minimal cost. We also receive goods from Oz Harvest which add to the range of foods and meals we can serve our guests.

We were contacted two years ago by an aged care facility who said that some of their guests missed contributing to society in some way. They asked if some of their residents could come and help, and

they have been coming ever since. They peel all our potatoes and carrots, and join in conversation with our guests who arrive early. It has been very good for them and also for some of our younger people to see that you can always help in some way.

When the guests are ready to go, they can take whatever food they need with them. Once the guests have left, the helpers can relax, have a meal then clean the kitchen and hall. Everything must be put away and left spotless, as the room is often hired out on weekends.

We now have a Tuesday lunch between 12.30 to 2 PM and it works in a similar way. Lunchtimes are not as busy as the night time where we only cater for 40 at lunch, while we regularly cater for 80 on Thursday nights.

I think most of our guests come for the company rather than just for the food. They are lonely, and if we can be a friend to them we have done a good thing. We now give out food parcels, we offer free showers, we have a small free op shop with linen, kitchen utensils and clothes which parishioners give us. We are now able to offer help finding accommodation through Launch Housing, we have small loans for bonds, rental assistance, school fees and uniforms, and we have limited overnight emergency accommodation.

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