

LONG ISLAND

On Long Island, a day for thanks, prayer and volunteering

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'I always want people to go home feeling more thankful and grateful'

Organizers say they've had a Thanksgiving sit-down meal at St. Frances De Chantal Roman Catholic Church in Wantagh for the past 37 years. NewsdayTV's Drew Scott reports. Credit: Staff

By **Dandan Zou and Brianne Ledda**

dandan.zou@newsday.com, brianne.ledda@newsday.com

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Thursday marked the first time Tom Burke pulled up a chair at the annual Thanksgiving dinner at St. Frances de Chantal Roman Catholic Church in Wantagh since the pandemic hit in 2020.

The church's holiday feast — free and open to anyone — holds a special place in Burke's heart. The Farmingdale resident met his late wife, Anna, when they were both volunteers at the same event in 1999. They were married in the church a year later.

"It's nice," said Burke, seated at a table decorated by fall colors, a pumpkin and plates of food. "I feel very comfortable here."

Thanksgiving traditions

The time-honored American tradition of turkey, stuffing, cranberries, endless pies of all sorts — returned Thursday for Burke, the three dozen others who joined him at the church and many others across Long Island. Another time-honored Thanksgiving tradition — volunteering for those with less on a day to celebrate a nation's bounty — also returned.



"I come here to be with people," said Hicksville resident Bradley Bradley, who attends Thanksgiving dinner every year at St. Frances De Chantal Catholic Church in Wantagh. Credit: Newsday/J. Conrad Williams Jr.

In Roosevelt, church volunteers worked through the better part of Thursday preparing free meals and clothing for those in need. Islandwide, other volunteers did the same, hoping to give at least a one-day reprieve to the rapidly expanding number of Long Islanders struggling to feed themselves and their families.

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At St. Frances de Chantal, diners took stock of their good fortune and looked to welcome others who were hurting. The mood Thursday was jovial and hopeful. Volunteers hung white banners where attendees wrote down what made them grateful this year. Doreen McDonald, a singer and performer from Seaford, played the piano as she sang a rendition of the 18th century homage to forgiveness and redemption, "Amazing Grace."

As a family

"There are people here for many different reasons," McDonald said. "Either it's loneliness, they're not with their family or there's estrangement or there's financial hardship, ... it's all addressed in the fact that we're here to love each other as a family."

Bradley Bradley of Hicksville has attended the dinner since early 1990s. Sitting next to a friend Thursday, Bradley said he enjoys catching up with friends made during previous Thanksgivings at the church.

"It's just a nice, joyful atmosphere," he said. "I come here to be with people. ... We are supposed to be with people."

Meanwhile, other faith groups across Long Island delivered or gave away food to those in need.

Volunteers with Mount Sinai Baptist Church Cathedral and Roosevelt Youth Center prepared food to eat and clothes to wear for anyone walking in. And many did.

Pastor Arthur Mackey of Roosevelt said about 100 people came Thursday to pick up food, which was donated by Carroll's Kitchen in Bellmore, church members and others from the community.

"The Roosevelt Youth Center is the heart of Roosevelt and we want to keep the heart of Roosevelt healthy," he said at the giveaway, an annual tradition for the 24 years he's been pastor.



Pastor Arthur Mackey Jr, right, of Mount Sinai Baptist Church Cathedral, hands out turkey dinners Thursday at the Roosevelt Youth Center to hamlet resident Andrey Simmons. Credit: Newsday/J. Conrad Williams Jr.

The steady procession of people coming into the center for a meal is not atypical for Long Island in 2023, according to advocates for the hungry and those who are food insecure.

A growing need

Paule Pachter, CEO of Long Island Cares — the Harry Chapin Regional Food Bank, said their network of food banks have seen a continued increase in demand since the pandemic. While 230,000 Long Islanders were struggling to put food on the table earlier this year, Pachter said that number may be closer to 325,000 as the end of 2023 nears, including 65,000 children who are food insecure.

He attributed the uptick to two factors: a roughly 30% increase in the average shopping basket cost and a growing number of immigrants seeking help, most recently from Ukraine.

"People are coming for the staples," Pachter said, noting that eggs and milk are items people seek out.

"The cost of goods is really impacting middle-class families," he added.

Irene Smith, a community member picking up food from the youth center in Roosevelt, said this Thanksgiving, she's thankful for family and "places like this for helping the needy."

"And I just thought about something," she said, as she turned back to the youth center. "I've got to get another plate for a homeless man I just saw coming here."

With Grant Parpan



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