News

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The old saying about a looming payday is that "the money is already spent."

In Harlan County, a rural mining county located in southern Kentucky, the money was definitely spent – just not by the people who earned it. Blackjewel LLC, whose mining operations have closed down in several other states, filed for bankruptcy July 1.

The company apparently all but absconded with money withdrawn from its employees' paychecks for child support payments and 401(k) contributions, but the workers said the money was never deposited in their accounts.

"This was such an injustice that was done to these people – and it has had a tremendous impact on them – because these coal miners live paycheck to paycheck, and the company has already spent it to pay their own, other bills," Fr. Jim Sichko said in a phone interview for Catholic News Service.

Sichko, who has been a priest in the Diocese of Lexington for 21 years, traveled to Harlan County to fix that injustice. He met with nearly 200 miners at Holy Trinity

Catholic Church in Harlan July 15, took down their information, found out what they needed most and ultimately wrote out $20,000 worth of checks for utilities and other basic needs.

The priest, who was designated a "missionary of mercy" by Pope Francis three years ago, said, "Harlan is at the very edge of our diocese, and I am not the priest at Holy Trinity, but it was a wonderful opportunity to help people without having to quote a word of Scripture."

"I would say that 99% of them were not Catholic, and had not even set foot on Catholic church property, but these people have had their cars repossessed and their utilities shut off," Sichko said.

The well-known evangelical missionary was, he said, "traveling and on my way back to Kentucky – and totally unaware of what was going on – until I read dozens of emails (from Harlan) and I realized that this is what I had to do."

The workers' money disappeared the day the bankruptcy was filed. Miners and other employees showed up for a meeting July 9 and were told the bad news. If the money is not repaid, a criminal investigation could come next – along with possible felony charges being filed against the company.

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A self-described "full-time evangelist," Sichko explained that "I don't have a regular parish, but there are 100 of us – evangelist missionaries – who travel back and forth across the country, (raising money) and another 700 around the world, all doing God's work."

Other than covering his living expenses, and such items as car and health insurance, Sichko gives all of the money he raises back to the Lexington Diocese.

Pope Francis in his 2016 designation called for the missionaries "to preach about mercy, and to pardon even those sins reserved to the Holy See." Mercy, the pope said, "is the bridge that connects God and man, opening our hearts to a hope of being loved forever, despite our sins."

And connect with the employees of Blackjewel LLC is exactly what Sichko did.

"When I showed up, there were people lined up out the door, with local police there to help with crowds, and as people showed me proof of what they needed, I wrote (out) the checks, then mailed them back," Sichko said.

The evangelist estimated that his stay lasted roughly two hours, and, Sichko said, "I paid everything – electric, rent, etc. – but not cellphones."

When asked about the current state of miners' housing, Sichko replied frankly.

"It hasn't changed much since your great-grandfather's day. For some people its livable, and for others it's not," said the priest.

When all was said and done, however, one person still remained who had not been helped. He closed the church's doors and promptly paid the individual's rent for an entire year.

"No one left empty-handed, and as it says in Matthew 20:16, 'The first shall be last and the last shall be first; many are called but few are chosen,'' Sichko said.

"I was shocked at how viral my visit went," Sichko said. The priest's gesture hit every major newspaper and diocesan internet link within hours of its conclusion.

Looking back on his mission, Sichko, who spoke by phone from Houston, said that "it was an amazing experience, and from here I go to India for three weeks."

In India, Sichko will preach, along with Cardinal Oswald Gracia of Mumbai, at the country's Tabor Bhavan Divine Retreat Center. Located in Muringoor in the Indian state of Kerala, the center has hosted some 10,000 Catholics since its inception.