News



Archbishop Ronald Hicks of New York, right, and CEO of Catholic Charities New York Antonio Fernandez help volunteers distribute food to residents of Washington Heights in Northern Manhattan, on Holy Thursday, April 2. (NCR photo/Camillo Barone)



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Under a gray sky and a steady push of cold wind, Archbishop Ronald Hicks of New York stood in line like any other volunteer. Light rain fell across a long stretch of folding tables set with fresh produce, cartons of milk and eggs, canned food and sealed packages of fish.

Next to him, Antonio Fernandez, CEO of Catholic Charities New York, worked at a similar pace. The line of families extended down the block in Washington Heights in Northern Manhattan. Hicks lifted a package, leaned slightly forward, and asked each person in turn, "*¿Quieres salmon?*" Then, in English, "Do you want salmon?" He placed the fish into open bags and carts, moving steadily as the line advanced.

The Holy Thursday (April 2) event drew more than 450 local families seeking food assistance and was one of Hicks's first public appearances in New York since assuming his role as its new archbishop. Volunteers distributed fresh fruits, vegetables, dairy products, lean proteins and packaged goods donated in part by Goya Foods. Before the final boxes were handed out, Hicks gathered volunteers, Catholic Charities staff and local authorities for a brief address and blessing.

"What we're doing here today — this is faith into action. This is where the church needs to be, and I love that we're doing it on Holy Thursday. Staying in church is important, worshiping, loving, serving God in church. It's important. But we don't stay there. We go out. We go out to the community. We go out where there's a need," he said.

"On this day, he not only gives us the Eucharist, but he washes the disciples' feet. That means he teaches us how to serve. If there's a need, wash their feet. If they are hungry, give them something to eat and see my face in them. He asks us to see his face in all that we serve. We do not gather as 'them' and 'us.' It's simply us together, todos, todos, todos, everyone together."

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> —New York Archbishop Ronald Hicks
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The distribution was organized by Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of New York, one of the city's largest faith-based social service providers. Fernandez said local needs have grown more visible and more urgent in the last year. Families began arriving hours before the event's scheduled start. Some came shortly after midnight, concerned supplies might run out, he said.

"The archbishop met with the mayor and we spoke about food insecurity. I think there's truly a crisis in this city about that, especially with the new federal administration, about the SNAP benefits, the new requirements you have to have in order to qualify — it's gonna make things a lot harder for people to actually qualify," he said.



Archbishop Ronald Hicks of New York gives remarks at a Catholic Charities New York food distribution event in Washington Heights, Northern Manhattan, on Holy Thursday, April 2. (NCR photo/Camillo Barone)

He added that Catholic Charities' work extends beyond immediate relief.

"We're looking into how do we teach people how to fish? How do we help people to become self-sufficient and go from assistance to independence?" Fernandez said. "You're coming for food, we will feed you, but why are you here? How can we help you so you don't have to come back? Is this about the job? Is this about mental health resources? Whatever issues they may have, we help them, so they can have that working relationship not to have to come back here."

The agency feeds more than 400,000 recipients every year, Fernandez said, and it opens new weekly food pantries on a regular basis. He added that expansion efforts

are ongoing across boroughs including the Bronx and Staten Island.

Goya Foods contributes a significant portion of the distributed goods, continuing a long-standing partnership with Catholic Charities.

A Goya spokesperson told NCR that for Holy Thursday the company donated 300,000 pounds of food, and that for more than 10 years Goya has donated 1.8 million pounds of food to Catholic Charities and their agencies.

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