

The attorney for the poor

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How would you like to get your own Lombardi Trophy signed by New Orleans Saints coach Sean Payton? It was one of 30 decorated "shrimp boots" raffled at the New Orleans Home Show held in late September. There was a cowboy boot from the Zac Brown Band, and a pointy-toed boot from the Broadway show "Wicked."

The "boots" raised money for Catholic Charities' Oil Spill Relief Fund. Catholic Charities has been operating five relief centers in four south Louisiana parishes, and while the money coming in dwindles, the needs of the fishers, oystermen, and other businesses that rely on our seafood industry grow.

"The really scary thing for us is that the attention has gone away," said Margaret Dubuisson, Catholic Charities director of communications. "And every week families are falling further behind."

Catholic Charities USA, the social service network to which the New Orleans agency belongs, celebrated its 100th anniversary this year, with centennial events that took place in Washington in September. The network, which is committed to reducing poverty in America, last month released the findings of its annual survey, a compilation of firsthand data from its local agencies serving more than 9 million people each year. The data comes on the heels of the U.S. Census Bureau's report on the increased numbers of the poor.

Catholic Charities' data shows a 7.5 percent increase from 2008 in the total number of people it serves. The largest increase in requests was for food services: Since 2008, there was a 15 percent increase in total requests for food services, with over 1 million more people visiting food banks/pantries.

The high national poverty numbers, Catholic Charities USA president Fr. Larry Snyder said, "unfortunately come as little surprise to those who have been working closely with the growing population for whom poverty has become a daily reality. We have not seen numbers like these since President Lyndon B. Johnson waged his "War on Poverty" and frankly, are astounded the nation has done so little to address the poverty crisis that is sweeping our country. ... This trend makes us even more determined to redouble our efforts to reduce poverty in America."

Snyder added that the centennial celebration marked also the inauguration of "our plans for the next day, and the day after that, and for the next year to reach our goal of cutting poverty in half by 2020."

He cited southeastern Ohio, where unemployment is now at 20 percent, as an example of what the poverty numbers look like on the ground. "These are people who are only one disaster away from going under. The children who sleep in a car because they don't have a home. The teenage girl who must walk to a neighbor's trailer to take a shower, her feet picking up dust and dirt back to the camper she shares with her parents and younger brother. A mother who dreams of a future for her daughter, even as she depends desperately on the local food pantry for meals. The father who believes he is worth more dead than alive to his sons -- they would be eligible for Supplemental Social Security funds without him."

In 1910 on the campus of The Catholic University of America in Washington, the National Conference of

Catholic Charities was founded to promote the creation of diocesan charities bureaus, ?to bring about a sense of solidarity? among those in charitable ministries, and ?to be the attorney for the poor.?

Catholic Charities, through the local diocesan-affiliated arms, is the largest social service provider in the country, second only to the federal government.

That?s a diligent and very busy attorney.

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