



MATER DOLOROSA KITCHEN STAFF STEPS UP – AND HUNKERS DOWN – TO FEED THE VULNERABLE

SIERRA MADRE (May 11, 2020) – Throughout the San Gabriel Valley of California, and the nation, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the delivery of prepared meals to vulnerable home-bound seniors and homeless individuals, creating a crisis within the larger crisis.

In Sierra Madre, home for nearly a century to the Mater Dolorosa Passionist Retreat Center, this crisis hit when the meals program operated by the City and the YWCA was affected by California's "Stay Home" order. At the same time, retreatants scheduled to attend religious retreats at Mater Dolorosa also had to stay home, creating an opportunity that led to the creation of the Retreat Center's new Food Ministry.

"Sierra Madre's Town Manager, Gabe Engeland, welcomed our offer to step in with food preparation to fill the void. The center was eager to do it out of our tradition of hospitality and compassion," said Retreat Center Director Michael Cunningham. "But before we could commit, we had to make sure our kitchen staff would be safe."

Fortunately, five kitchen staff members volunteered to move into now-vacant rooms at the Retreat Center so they could avoid exposure to the virus and immediately started preparing, cooking, freezing and packaging meals. In their first week, they prepared between 200 to 300 meals, but surging demand quickly swelled their workload to nearly 2,000 meals a week.

"We were happy to do it," said Mater Dolorosa's Executive Chef Ricardo Solda. "All of us love the life here at Mater Dolorosa, we love the priests and working here brings us a lot of joy."

Solda, like many others on the kitchen staff, now only sees his family during one brief meeting a week.

"I change clothes before I go in and before I come back, we wear masks, and we follow the social distancing rules at home because being able to safely continue the Food Ministry is so important to us," Solda said.

In addition to preparing meals for Sierra Madre seniors, Solda and his crew also cook for a senior community in Duarte, a homeless community in the Lario Park area of Azusa served by Foothill's Kitchen in Monrovia, and the St. Francis Center in Los Angeles.

"While the primary mission at Mater Dolorosa is spiritual in nature, the COVID-19 pandemic has inspired us to reach out in other ways," said Cunningham. "The Food Ministry Program allows us to feed the human spirit in a very practical way, so we hope to secure continued funding to turn what started as a necessary response to the pandemic into a permanent, ongoing Food Ministry program."

Each meal costs \$6.53 to produce, with funding to date provided by the Retreat Center's constituents and friends. A major corporate sponsor of the Retreat Center, Cacique, has agreed to match corporate donations to the Food Ministry dollar-for-dollar.

"Cacique's support has been invaluable," Cunningham said. "They have been the donation engine that has allowed us to respond so quickly and effectively to this crisis, and without them we would not be serving

anywhere near the number of individuals we are now helping. We hope and pray that Cacique's kindness will inspire others."

Donations can be made at: <https://materdolorosa.org/covid-19-mater-dolorosa-response/>.

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Mater Dolorosa Passionist Retreat Center executive chef Ricardo Solda and Ike Susilawati in the midst of preparing meals for the Retreat Center's Food Ministry. (Photo: Michael J. Cunningham)