

# Old St. Joseph's Church

Est. 1733 | Philadelphia's Jesuit Parish

321 Willings Alley  
Philadelphia PA 19106  
215-923-1733  
[www.oldstjoseph.org](http://www.oldstjoseph.org)

June 16, 2019 | The Most Holy Trinity

## Food, Served with Big Helpings of Faith and Friends

*Today's essayist is Mary Freedman, a long-standing volunteer with Faith, Food and Friends. She writes to share a snapshot of Old St. Joseph's outreach program:*

*With HOPE in God's goodness  
we meet as a group of men who share  
common problems, pain, sorrows,  
joys and successes.*

*Many of us share problems  
in addiction, homelessness, poverty, mental or  
emotional disorders and spiritual emptiness.  
We desire holistic healing of our bodies,  
minds and spirits.  
We pray that this will be the first step  
in turning our lives around.*

*WE HAVE HOPE.*

The Faith, Food & Friends Statement of Purpose was written over 20 years ago by the men who attended the program. It is posted on the bulletin board. A guest reads the statement before every meal. Most of the time, men hesitate and look down or shake their head when asked to read it. But no matter what, the reading is treated with respect.

Sometimes a guest will ask to read the Statement of Purpose. It was a surprise one day when one of the quieter guests asked if he could read the Statement. This man was a long-time attendee, well known and friendly, but usually he kept to himself. The time came and he stood up. Refusing the printed copy, he recited the entire Statement from memory. Barbelin Hall erupted in applause.



Old St. Joseph's is equipped with an audio hearing loop. Switch on the T-coil function of your device to use the loop. Booklets with the Sunday readings are in the rear of the church.



Faith, Food & Friends (FF&F), OSJ's primary outreach program, serves men from all walks of life and all backgrounds. Our guests are millennials and retirees. They were born in Philly, in other cities, in other countries. They are veterans. They work in construction and food service. They are dishwashers, security guards, house painters and musicians. Somewhere along the line the ability to cope with the demands of everyday living have become too much for them. They are among the most vulnerable in our communities.

Staffed entirely by volunteers and program guests, Faith, Food & Friends serves a noon meal to a maximum of 70 guests in Barbelin Hall on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. This is the heart of the program. Preparing and sharing a meal with others is one of the most restorative acts on the planet! The food feeds the body. Being with others and having non-confrontational conversations feeds the soul. Food and a meal shared is a universal act that connects us all.

The door to Barbelin Hall opens at 11:30 AM and guests enter to find coffee and tea available.

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Guests and volunteers circulate and catch up on the latest news. Mail is distributed. Help for men seeking medical or social services is provided thanks, to volunteers who share their talents: a nurse takes blood pressure readings; a librarian helps order eyeglasses through the New Eyes for the Needy website; a caseworker fills out rent rebate forms which a notary public notarizes; a social worker helps address housing issues.

Most importantly, volunteers listen. Volunteers instinctively exemplify the lines from *Teach Me to Listen.*, a prayer adapted by Father John Veltri SJ: “Help me to be aware that no matter what words I hear, the message is, ‘Accept the person I am. Listen to me.’” A copy of the prayer hangs on the bulletin board in the FF&F office.

The meal is served at noon. For some of the men, this is their only meal that day. Longtime Faith, Food & Friends volunteers staff the kitchen and other volunteers serve the meal restaurant-style. The meals are planned month by month and the food is ordered specifically to match the menus. This pre-planning method is cost-effective and allows the program to consistently provide a nutritiously balanced meal. Working as a team, volunteers prepare a meal of about 1400 calories consisting of three to four courses. There is always soup. As one of our guests put it, “It’s never too hot for soup!” A freshly made salad is served, followed by a main course with sides and then dessert.

After the meal, guest volunteers clean the hall and kitchen. Some of the best cleaners, dishwashers and stove cleaners in Philly sit at our tables. They have been sharing their skills with us for years. While clean-up is happening, socks and hygiene essentials—soap, razors, deodorant and

toothpaste—are distributed to those who need them. Through the generosity of parish donations, these much needed, much appreciated items are always available.

While Faith, Food & Friends serves up some of the best food in Philly, it’s more than the food that keeps everyone coming back. Fellowship and respect for each other are key elements of the program. Barbelin Hall is a safe and welcoming space where volunteers and guests call each other by name. For some guests, OSJ’s outreach program is the only stable element in an otherwise chaotic life. For two hours or so, three days a week, men are welcomed and accepted for who they are. They can breathe easy, feel safe and enjoy a good meal.

When asked what makes Faith, Food & Friends different, the men talk about the respect and community they find here. They talk about the people, the place and “always finding help when I am in need.” One guest called us “a love-in.” But one answer sums it all up. “The volunteers are “super”!! The gossip is fabulous. The food can’t be beat! Staff are Top Shelf!!! ❤ THANX.”

This is the heart of the faith element. The faith part of Faith, Food & Friends is not so much the faith-sharing between guests and volunteers as it is practicing the hospitality that makes this safe welcoming space possible. It’s parishioners’ and supporters’ generosity that provides the food and services that make up the program. Men in need enter Barbelin Hall and find a meal *and* a community.

Old St. Joseph’s Church outreach program is a gift of faith given to this parish. With the continuing generosity of our community, the men who come through the doors of Barbelin Hall will always find Faith, Food and Friends.

—Mary Freedman

*Front image: The coffee station and a typical lunch at Faith, Food & Friends.*