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A Queens Nun With a Talent for Begging



Sister Elisabeth Anne, of the Little Sisters of the Poor, visits the Hunts Point Terminal Market in the Bronx each week seeking donations of food for the Queen of Peace Residence in Queens. Credit Stephanie Keith for The New York Times

By Eli Rosenberg

To some of the workers at the Hunts Point Produce Market in the Bronx, it is a familiar sight: a nun or two darting around the concrete loading docks every Wednesday. Sister Elisabeth Anne, 76, has been making the weekly trip to the large industrial market for more than 35 years to pick up food for the older adults at the residence where she lives and works.

On Wednesday, she squeezed fruits — a persimmon here, a Minneola there — as she crossed items off her grocery list. She greeted the workers warmly on her way to stopping at more than a dozen businesses that call the market home. By the time she was done, the van she came in was filled with hundreds of pounds of produce — all donated by companies that have come to expect her visit — that will help feed those who live at Queen of Peace Residence in Queens Village.

“What’s for dinner, Sister?” Michael D’Arrigo, a vice president at the wholesale produce company D’Arrigo Brothers Company of New York, said as Sister Elisabeth Anne sampled a cherry from a display.

Sister Elisabeth Anne remembers the first time she was told to go to the market and solicit donations. It was 1979 and it was not easy, she said.

“To go out and be a beggar was the worst thing you could ever ask me to do,” she said. “I cried my heart out for two weeks.”

On her first day, she recalled garbage cans of coal on fire, drunken workers and a fear of violence. “It was dreadful,” she said, her voice barely rising over the rumble of idling trucks. “There was no police protection, no security.”

Sister Elisabeth Anne’s colleagues said she had rarely missed a trip to the market, where she is a favorite among the workers.

“It’s got a bad rap, it’s tough down here, it’s the Bronx,” Gabriela D’Arrigo, the marketing director for D’Arrigo, said. “But she makes people rethink what kind of community it is. Everybody loves dealing with her.”

Over the years, Sister Elisabeth Anne said she had learned to embrace the tradition of begging that helps keep Queen of Peace Residence afloat. The home provides housing, food and care for 85 low-income older adults. The weekly food donations help provide three meals a day for the residents. Nineteen nuns live on the building’s fifth floor.

Sister Elisabeth Anne also solicits donations from parishes and foundations, which, along with grants, the rent from some residents and Medicaid reimbursements, help pay the bills.

Sister Sheila McLoughlin, the director of nursing at Queen of Peace, said the residence was one of 197 homes around the world run by Little Sisters of the Poor, an order whose mission is to support impoverished older people. She said Sister Elisabeth Anne’s role was as a “collecting sister” and explained that begging was part of the tradition established by the order’s founder, St. Jeanne Jugan, in 1839.

Of Sister Elisabeth Anne, Sister McLoughlin said, “She’s really able to ask people for gifts.”

After a lunch of steak with mushrooms, mashed potatoes, pasta, carrots and salad on Wednesday, residents of the home chatted around tables in the dining room.

Winnie Valcancick, 78, said she moved in two months ago. “It’s wonderful here,” she said of the residence. “We’re all happy, and we’re grateful in our elderly years that we have a place that we feel safe and welcome.”

Ms. Valcancick said she had spent months trying to find a place she could afford in the city. “I would have gone anywhere,” she said.

Still, with income only from a pension and Social Security, she had been unable to find anything. “It’s very scary as you get older and you’re not financially equipped to pay the rents that New Yorkers have to pay,” she said.

Sister Elisabeth Anne walked nearby and smiled as residents enjoyed the fruits of her labor. She said she had learned to love her role.

“I’m the last on the ladder; I’m the lowest,” she said. “I’m the director of nothing except my life. Beggar. That’s my title.”