

# THE COMPANION

*The Newsletter of Bon Secours Volunteer Ministry*



## The Kingdom of God is Like Yeast



**By Mario Sultan** | 2021 - 2022 Volunteer | A graduate of Florida Institute of Technology

There is so much to talk about when it comes to spiritual growth in one's life. For those reading this - I pray that the yeast of the Spirit is awakened within you through these words.

Some of my community members and I came across the parable in Luke and Matthew about Jesus describing the Kingdom of God like yeast that is mixed with flour to produce a leaven, and that imagery stood out to me. I feel as though God constantly plants all sorts of wild desires in my heart. This fall, it was with homemade bread. I started baking sourdough around Thanksgiving after a conversation with my community a couple of months earlier. As I got into it, I began to see aspects of our BSVM spiritual growth pillar and all the beautiful complexities of our Faith come to fruition in this one simple process. To me, making bread as it has been done for thousands of years is a rich metaphor for our spirituality.

For those that do not know, sourdough is bread made solely from the wild yeast that exists in flour, living within a starter culture on the kitchen counter. Making bread from a starter consists only of water, flour, and salt. That is it. The natural yeasts that are in the flour and air, when combined with water and time, begin to consume the flour and multiply. In a similarly beautiful way, God is within each and every one of us and the yeast of God

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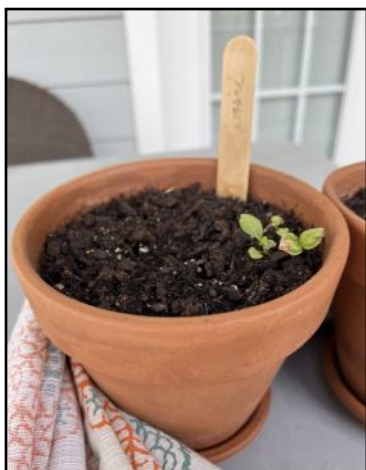


## Editor's Perch

By Emily Thrush | BSVM Site Leader

A year of service and spiritual formation gives Ministry Volunteers plenty of opportunities to explore, grow, dig deep, and wrestle with questions, dynamics, relationships, and ideas. Volunteers are never alone in this journey – they are surrounded by sisters, staff, alumni, and other supporters who walk with them in this year of transformation through service with others. Yet no matter the consistency of support or similarities between service years, every path forges ahead in a uniquely particular way, and any growth or fruit that might emerge from this year takes time. Uncertainty and waiting mark every experience at BSVM, and as you read more in this issue, those indicators do not typically feel comfortable!

You'll hear from two of our current volunteers who highlight the significance of time, prayer, and persistence: Patrick shares his experience in adjusting to different rhythms and expectations in the ministry of presence, and Mario shares the connection between bread-making (and the various stages before it's ready) and his spiritual growth. One of our alumni from 8 years ago, Matthew Parra, shares about the impact his BSVM year made on his subsequent career and relationships, and he encourages recent alumni to both give themselves space to process after their year, and to stay connected to one another once they leave. We hear from a faithful colleague and community partner Sean O'Brien who has supported



Basil grows and transforms just as volunteers do during their ministry year

several years of cohorts, and we feel his gratitude for the volunteers' "energetic and joyful presence at our community events" in Richmond, VA.

Each season of a BSVM year brings "something unknown, something new," and our challenge is to allow ourselves to be open to whatever stage we're passing through "and accept the anxiety of feeling [ourselves] in suspense and incomplete." A difficult posture, for sure! The BSVM community benefits from occasions when we can reconnect with the Sisters of Bon Secours and lean on their encouragement, wisdom, and support through the different stages of a volunteer year, to witness the testimony of sisters who have followed God's leading hand and trusted the slow work of God over time.

Whether you are in a stage of stability or instability in this moment, may you feel God's hand guiding you, and may you rest assured that God is working in, around, and through you with grace, goodness, and love. That work may seem hard to see, and we may feel impatient, awkward, anxious, or incomplete, but with time, prayer, and persistence, our prayer in faith can be: "Above all, trust in the slow work of God."

### "Patient Trust"

"Above all, trust in the slow work of God. We are quite naturally impatient in everything to reach the end without delay. We should like to skip the intermediate stages.

We are impatient of being on the way to something unknown, something new. Yet it is the law of all progress that is made by passing through some stages of instability and that may take a very long time.

And so I think it is with you. Your ideas mature gradually. Let them grow. Let them shape themselves without undue haste. Do not try to force them on as though you could be today what time - that is to say, grace and circumstances acting on your own good will - will make you tomorrow.

Only God could say what this new Spirit gradually forming in you will be.

Give our Lord the benefit of believing that his hand is leading you, and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself in suspense and incomplete.

Above all, trust in the slow work of God."

By Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, SJ, from *Hearts on Fire: Praying with Jesuits*, edited by Michael Harter, SJ



multiplies within us when the right conditions arise. I've seen this multiplication happen in my life when I allowed myself to be open to God. One of those ways was through my desire to pivot from my "successful" career job as a new engineer to full-time service. My path to reconversion happened only when I exercised humility and trust in something much greater than myself, which took my letting go of fake affirmation and prestige. I needed to allow God to take over in my life rather than depend on myself to do so. The Joy that came from that pivot was overwhelming. I began experiencing a familiar nudge to dig deeper, to love deeper. That same Joy and love was multiplying within me.

When you produce your sourdough starter, you then need to constantly feed it to keep it alive and viable for raising bread. These routine feedings involve removing a portion of that starter and replacing it with new flour and new water. Occasionally in my life, I have found that I had to remove much of the old to make room for the new. New perspectives, new compassion, new love. New growth is new life. We are constantly feeding this yeast within us. We have to in order to maintain Heaven here on earth. But when we finally have the yeast of the Spirit in abundance within us or in our communities, it is our obligation to share it with others, for we know the gift of this "better and lasting possession" (Heb. 10:34). I have been blessed with the opportunity to be in this year-long program, but it only happened when I changed course (left my job) and relinquished control, removing old perspectives, old definitions of love and compassion, old mindsets, and instead, opened to God's control, perspectives, love, compassion and way of life. Only in removing the old did I come to realize the fulfillment of those things. Oh what a Joy it has been so far! I am starting to experience an abiding and pervasive sense of well-being, peace and certainty amidst uncertainty and noise. It is a direct result of living in my community with people living on-mission, seeing God in different ways, and giving myself the space to hear God in those new ways. It is well with my soul knowing that God knows me and loves me.



The sourdough starter begins to take shape

The Kingdom of God is like yeast which is placed into *something*, that *thing* being flour. When it is finally time to make bread, we take some of that starter and mix it with all the bulk ingredients. The flour is us, our lives, our circumstances, our joy and our pain. I think for me, this stage resembles the messiness of life. There are moments when the dough is too sticky to knead and it just does not seem to hold its shape. But in fact, the more physical work you put into kneading it, the stronger the dough becomes. It may be tempting to add more flour, but adding flour only makes the bread denser and harder. To me, those are the moments where I want to indulge in the instant gratifications of life, practically in the form of embracing ignorance when we examine injustices, seeking the easy way out of handling hard emotional baggage, or pursuing things that prevent healing. Maybe the kneading that is happening in our lives is necessary for strengthening us into the people God wants us to be.

There is a lot of waiting that takes place following this physical step of kneading. The yeast takes time to raise our dough. It takes time but we ultimately know the outcome and anticipate it. Hours go by before seeing any noticeable growth in size. My spirituality has gone through phases where nothing seemed to be happening. I have since come to recognize the beauty in the waiting. How silence actually invites me to seek deeper connection, deeper understanding and deeper love with others and with the Divine. I believe that waiting is integral to developing one's Faith. The quiet Father, quiet Son and quiet Spirit, have never stopped working in my life.

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# Learning that Presence is Enough



**By Patrick Kollman** | 2021 - 2022 Volunteer | A graduate of the University of Notre Dame

When I first began service at Richmond Community Hospital, I felt a little lost. After a brief period of orientation, I was released on the floors with a bit of specific instruction and the vague goal of assisting the staff and patients however I could. Checking in on patients while rounding was awkward and challenging at first. Since I didn't have any concrete clinical responsibilities, I felt then like I didn't have much to offer the staff or patients. "Just" my company initially felt like not enough, and sometimes I questioned why I was even in the hospital when I didn't have a well-outlined job like the rest of the hospital staff had.

Experiences with patients, along with prayer and persistence, caused this discomfort with unstructured work to shift to what I now see as a profound blessing: the opportunity to offer myself to the patients in whatever way they need. Free from a rigid structure and outlined tasks to keep me "productive" throughout my days, I have the liberty to discern how I can best serve the hospital departments and accompany the patients through their challenging, lonely, or painful moments.

I got used to entering a room, introducing myself and explaining what my role is, then simply asking, "how can I help you?" And as I did that more and more, I realized just how many of the patients in this hospital were in need of someone to simply listen to them. Sometimes, it would be obvious. I would ask how they were, and they would launch into a vulnerable account of the profound challenges they've faced, and how they have ended up where they are. Other times, it took visiting every day for a week or two for someone to feel comfortable letting me know how they really were. And yet other times, people would tell me that all they needed was to listen to a song with me, or for me to wheel them outside into the sun, and I found an abundance of grace in these visits that did not involve much conversation as well.

After the rocky beginning, where my uncertainty compounded my discomfort, I've found that each new face, personality, and story I encounter at Richmond Community Hospital leaves a unique mark on me: whether it is a deeper understanding of the affliction of addiction, fond memories recounted with someone's remarkable sense of humor and personality despite deep personal struggles, or the profound feeling of love and grace while caring for an elderly and confused individual. Some patients are much more challenging to engage with than others, but I've come to love the process of finding different ways to gain trust and show compassion: for some patients, it's meant playing card games, for others it's meant going on walks, and others have opened up when I've asked about the role of faith in their lives.

Prayer has also played an important role in my growth into this ministry of presence. Before we go off to bed, our BSVM community often discusses the various "God moments" from our days, and this



Patrick visits with neighbors at the Community Angels event at the Sarah Garland Jones Center

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practice has helped me in seeing God in each of the patients I encounter. In personal prayer too, through the practice of coming back to moments from my day and seeking out the work of grace in them, it has illuminated to me the presence of a living God in these patients. These prayer practices allow me to find God's presence in the events of each day, even in seemingly mundane moments such as calming a nervous patient before an MRI or bringing dinner to somebody. By looking back through a prayerful lens, I see God working through patients, staff, and myself as we support each other in compassion and healing.

Through persistence, patience, and prayer, the different and nebulous structure that I was originally frustrated by has become a blank canvas that is being filled with deeply meaningful images, images that can only come about when I place myself by the bedside and patiently wait for God to do God's work. My experience so far with BSVM in Richmond Community Hospital has helped me to expand my understanding of compassionate service beyond just giving people concrete goods such as food or medicine. Although those are important, I've been shown the unique healing power of presence, of putting myself in the room with someone in need or companionship and letting God do the rest.



Chris Dethlefs,  
BSVM 2018-2019,  
organizes games  
for Extended  
Stay Patients at  
Richmond  
Community Hospital

Olivia Nguyen,  
BSVM 2019-2020,  
visits patients  
with the Chaplain  
at Richmond  
Community Hospital





## Sisters' Corner

Building Relationships Across the Miles

By Emily Thrush | BSVM Site Leader

Ministry Volunteers in Richmond got a special treat this winter: they got to host several sisters for lunch on a balmy weekend afternoon in the backyard of the Volunteer house. With life upended by the pandemic in so many ways over the last two years, the chance to share space and hospitality has been a gift. Each interaction with the sisters helps solidify the bonds of our larger Bon Secours family and makes the return to Marriottsville that much sweeter to reconnect.

This March, our Volunteers returned to Maryland for a retreat and shared another meal with the local sisters. Sr. Elaine inspired the idea to share creative time together, and BSVM Program Coordinator Liesel Rupprecht found a craft project that we could all collaborate on that engaged us in conversation about what places in our lives have felt like home. We cut out depictions of houses and created two framed collections of homes—one to live at the Retreat and Conference Center, and one to stay at the Richmond BSVM house.



Emily Thrush and Ministry Volunteers hosted several sisters for lunch in the backyard of the Volunteer house

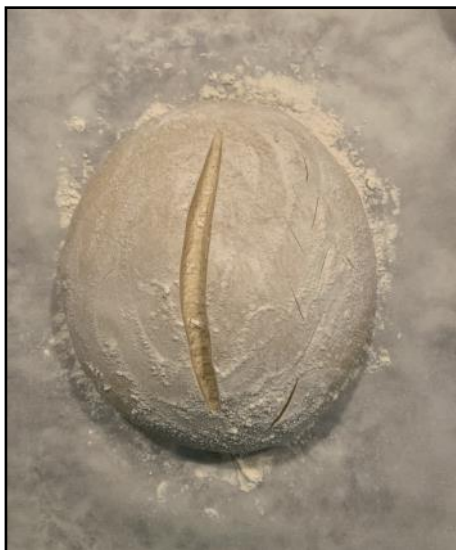


Ministry Volunteers visit sisters on Marian Hall during their winter retreat

The volunteers appreciated the Marriottsville grounds as they got a taste of both winter and spring during their Contemplative Retreat. They topped off their weekend in Marriottsville with a lunch on Marian Hall and a tour of the floor from Sr. Kathleen. We're looking forward to our next visit!



The finished art projects the Ministry Volunteers and sisters created during their winter retreat



The dough is then shaped and a design is cut on the top—giving the loaf its utter uniqueness

The dough is then shaped and a design is cut on the top. Those slashes in the bread give this loaf its utter uniqueness. But this is before we bake it at 500 °F. It takes so much work and waiting and heat to get to that beautiful loaf. Something as simple as flour, water, and salt still takes at least a week of work before any dough is ever formed. I've seen this in my own life too. Scars come with living. The wounds that cause them hurt in the moment, but God has a way of making something beautiful out of what (we perceive) to be ugly. So much of the ugliness in my life was transformed into beautiful signs of God's grace. A difficult family life growing up has revealed new truths and ideals that I deeply desire in my future family and has slowly shaped how I love others. It is a beautiful testament to the power of God working in and through my life.

There are thousands of recipes for making sourdough, yet at the heart of them all lies the same basic constituents - flour, water, salt. Every sourdough starter is unique and the manner in which we develop it, maintain it, and the environment in which it exists make them all slightly different.

No two loaves are the same either. It is often difficult to believe that there are also an infinite number of ways to spend a life and to form a unique spirituality. The recipes we choose to follow are unique to each one of us. To recognize that and to believe that there is truth in other recipes, in other ways to connect with God, is truly liberating and opens us up to a different dimension of loving compassion.

The BSVM year so far has allowed me to recognize that God exists in each and every person, in all moments. I see this every day in the way I love and am loved by the students I interact with at my ministry site at Cristo Rey Richmond High School. Working with high school students requires time to build trust, patience as it builds, and some kneading work to extend grace in the day to day. Yet there is so much Joy in being able to see every person as a divine extension of God. The Kingdom of God is at hand, in our volunteer house, in our neighborhood, in our students, our patients, our friends, our family and every single person we meet and do not meet. I pray that we may have the compassion to understand that every person possesses this God-seed and the courage to affirm it for others. This is what growing spiritually means to me.



The finished sourdough loaf to be shared among the Ministry Volunteers



## Friend of BSVM: Sean O'Brien



By Sean O'Brien, Director of Community Health, BSRHS

*Sean O'Brien is the Director of Community Health in the Bon Secours Richmond Health System. He was part of the initial group of colleagues who helped BSVM establish a second*

*volunteer house in Richmond, VA, which first opened for the 2018-2019 service year. We are so grateful for his hospitality, warmth, and enthusiastic support of the ministry!*

### ***How were you first introduced to BSVM?***

A few years ago, I heard that there were discussions among Bon Secours Richmond (BSR) Mission leaders regarding the potential to bring the Bon Secours Volunteer Ministry to Richmond. I remember reading and learning about the work and experiences of the Volunteer Ministry in Baltimore and getting extremely excited with the thought of having a Ministry chapter in Richmond. Having served in various positions connected to Richmond Community Hospital and BSR community health programs in Richmond's East End, I was ecstatic when I learned that the volunteers would live and work in the East End community. I also felt a sense of honor, because I knew that the volunteers were a real embodiment of the Sisters' legacy and their commitment to serve.

***What gifts have you/your staff received from the volunteers?*** Our Community Health team is based at the Sarah Garland Jones Center for Healthy Living. One of the Center's guiding principles is to be a welcoming place for authentic inclusion and social association, and we bring this principle to life throughout the year by hosting outdoor community events that are welcome to anyone.

I think the greatest gift we've received from the volunteers has been their energetic and joyful presence at our community events. The kids love them, and the adults are digging it because the kids are playing and having fun. The volunteers have also been key organizers and coordinators for events, like our bike giveaway and youth bike ride. They've been one of the catalysts for bringing these events to life.



Ministry Volunteers gather with their Site Supervisors and Sarah Garland Jones staff to commemorate the start of their service year



Nancy Figueroa, BSVM 2019-2020, placed at Sarah Garland Jones Center and serving students through a nutrition program



Current Ministry Volunteers attend a Community Angels event hosted at the Sarah Garland Jones Center in December 2021

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*In what ways have you been able to support the volunteers?*

We've always striven to make the volunteers feel welcome and appreciated. We're there for the volunteers in formal and informal ways. We show up to give our support and appreciation during formal commissioning and closing ceremonies. We watch their house when they are away. We open our Center for them to use when they need extra workspace. We are present to listen and support them as they progress on their BSVM journey.

*How has the Richmond community been impacted by BSVM's presence?*

The volunteers are a source of pride for all the BSR employees who either work with or know of their presence in Richmond. In a sense, their presence in Richmond is a living representation of why our health system is special, why it's different. To know these volunteers and hear their stories is to experience a special connection to a very specific hope for the future of health care. It represents a tangible connection between the spirit of the Sisters of Bon Secours and a new generation of people who are truly dedicated to give good help to those in need. Many of our BSVM volunteers aspire to future careers in health care, pastoral care, social work or community organizing. I take deep comfort in knowing that the BSVM volunteers will be the future leaders shaping the delivery of health care.

DO YOU KNOW A YOUNG  
ADULT WHO IS R.E.A.D.Y. FOR  
A YEAR OF TRANSFORMATION?

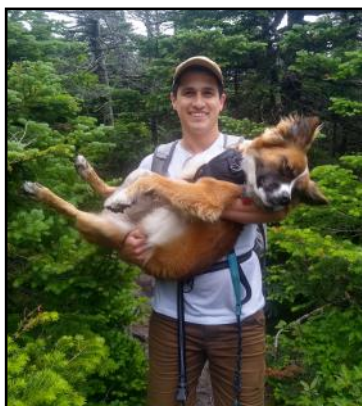
- **Reflective** on community & justice
- **Eager** to build relationships
- **Able** to live simply
- **Dedicated** to spiritual growth
- **Yearning** to grow through service with others

REFER THEM TO BSVM!

Send contact info to [volunteer@bshsi.org](mailto:volunteer@bshsi.org) or fill out the Interest Form at [bit.ly/joinusapply](https://bit.ly/joinusapply)



## Alumni Profile: Matthew Parra



Matthew and his dog Sohla

By Matthew Parra | BSVM 2013-2014

***How did your experience with BSVM shape the years following your year of service?*** For its most measurable impact, my career course shifted following my year of service. I redirected from medicine toward social work, and now do my work with young people and families, primarily through the school system. This is an outgrowth of the relationships my volunteer community fostered with neighbors in Baltimore, through which we witnessed systemic risk in the city, and even greater communal resilience. Through my year of ministry, I found that my personal gifts, as well as those fostered and committed to with BSVM – prioritizing presence, accompaniment, liberation, health, and attunement to social and racial equity – were best served within the field of social work. I have the privilege of putting these into practice daily through the present relationships in my work. With BSVM, I connected to the power of hearing someone's story, and helping them tell it in a way of empowerment. I see great healing can occur here, and this is also something I bring into my current role of service.

***What advice do you have to offer former volunteers as they continue to process their BSVM experience?***

For me, it was an enduring struggle to distinguish between letting my ministry year lead and inform my life, and trying to replicate it. The BSVM year is a singular experience. I found myself wanting – and trying with futility – to manifest it again, exactly as it occurred. After ending my year with BSVM, I navigated stages of loss and grief – of the community, the relationships, the moments of connection and creativity. I'd encourage other volunteers to allow for the grief and the loss. Be open to and curious about them. It can be profound, at times painful, and allows the year of ministry to continue well beyond the closing ceremony.

And for more concrete advice: stay connected to your community members! They can see you and understand the experience like no one else. For me, they are touchstones that can re-energize the most sacred parts of myself, those which had so much air to breathe with BSVM and which can at times feel a bit suffocated in life beyond it. It brings such joy to connect to them.

***What reading have you found to be informative, helpful and/or inspirational for volunteers in the BSVM formation or for those wishing to continue to explore the pillars of BSVM?***

The Deepest Well – Nadine Burke Harris, MD

I wish I could have read this while living in Baltimore. It explores how adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) can impact biology, as well as their interactions in, and of, the environment. It's important to remember, however, to not let resilience get lost in this framework, which primarily explores risk.

Exhalation - Ted Chiang

This collection of short stories, not explicitly spiritual or faith-based, asks a lot of questions about how spirituality and developing community might fit within a modern and increasingly digital life.



Matthew and his partner, Lexi, at her white coat ceremony

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Matthew with his 2013-2014 BSVM Community

### Everything Belongs – Richard Rohr

This was once on the bookshelf of the Baltimore volunteer house, and perhaps still is! I've returned to read it often and think of this line most days: "I watch how foolishly man guards his nothing — thereby keeping us out. Truly, God is hated here."

### What were some of the gifts you received during your time of service? Have any of these gifts helped you specifically during this time of pandemic?

I received the gift of stillness – of not needing more than the present moment and its company, be that company animate, natural, spiritual. I received practice being in relationship, actively, not

always with the concreteness of physical presence, but through emotional and spiritual connectedness. Both these served me quite well in the pandemic. From stillness, I had the right muscles developed to not (often) panic in vacant time and liminal space. From the latter practice, I felt more secure in my most valued relationships, tethered by something beyond shared activities and physical proximity. I also received the gift of learning to despair in community, to not run from desolation when the moment deserves it. I learned that if it's paradoxical, it's almost always true; by inviting desolation in and entertaining it with those I love and trust, I find consolation and move towards God.

## BSVM Community Life



Volunteers visit the historic St. John's Church



Emily, Patrick and Caroline enjoy an evening by the fire pit



Caroline and Ally find the golden hour in Richmond



## Bon Secours Volunteer Ministry

*Sisters of Bon Secours, USA*

1525 Marriottsville Road,  
Marriottsville, MD 21104

## Cover Photo

Shannon Curran, BSVM Director, with the 2021-2022 BSVM Volunteers during their winter retreat at the Bon Secours Retreat & Conference Center. Taken by Emily Thrush, Site Leader.

### BSVM Staff

Shannon Curran, *Director*

Emily Thrush, *Site Leader*

Liesel Rupprecht, *Program Coordinator*

## Our Mission

*Bon Secours Volunteer Ministry, sponsored by the Sisters of Bon Secours, provides the opportunity for women and men to participate in the Sisters' commitment to justice in radical solidarity with the poor, the suffering, and those most in need. By sharing the Bon Secours charism of compassion, healing, and liberation, the ministry nurtures and sustains individuals in their personal and communal journeys towards transformation through service with others.*

*To nurture this transformative journey, Bon Secours Volunteer Ministry supports individuals through a year of spiritual formation. The ministry is structured with five pillars that support this growth. Volunteers commit to: grow spiritually, develop an intentional community, live simply, practice God's justice, and learn through service with others. Throughout this year, volunteers discover that by sharing the charism of compassion, healing, and liberation with others they, in turn, receive the charism from those they serve.*

## Support BSVM

**Share your time and enthusiasm.** Your personal presence is one of the best ways to support the program. Send a letter of support, or schedule a time to visit our community outside or over Zoom. Contact [BSVMoffice@bshsi.org](mailto:BSVMoffice@bshsi.org).

**Support the program financially.** It costs about \$16,000 to support one volunteer for the year, including rent, health insurance, stipend and funds for community support. Monetary donations or gently used furnishings for the volunteer houses are greatly appreciated.

## Donations are tax-deductible

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Make checks payable to **Bon Secours Volunteer Ministry** & mail to:

*Bon Secours Volunteer Ministry  
1525 Marriottsville Road  
Marriottsville, MD 21104*

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