

COURIER-JOURNAL

NEWSPAPER OF THE DIOCESE OF ROCHESTER
Our 99th Year

12 Pages Wednesday, September 8, 1982 35 Cents

They Work To Remove Bars To Conscience

By John Dash

There are priests and other clergymen in jail around the world — in jail for following their consciences against prevailing political winds, in jail and subject to torture, and in jail for disobeying laws designed to deprive people of basic human rights.

And there are priests in this diocese who have made it their business to help their brothers in the cloth in a unique way.

A network of diocesan priests, working with the organization Amnesty International (AI), writes letters to government officials — and newspapers — indicating interest in the well-being of imprisoned clergy.

The idea is that the letters show public attention is focused on the person detained. Under such attention, it is thought, officials are more likely to give the prisoner treatment in accord with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, an uncommon occurrence in certain areas.

The hub of the local priests network is Father Benedict Ehmann who jokingly said last week that he took up the cause, in part, for something to do in retirement.

Actually, he said, "It was a job waiting to be done that nobody else seemed to be doing," a case, he said, of "picking up the broom when it wasn't being taken up at the moment."

There are about 35 priests here who write a letter a month to such diverse areas as the Transkei, Czechoslovakia, Romania, China, Guatemala, the Philippines, Poland, South Korea and Brazil.

The priests are alerted to the arrest or disappearance of clergy in those countries and others through Urgent Action Network, a mechanism of AI which provides within a matter of days the names, circumstances and/or reasons for arrest, relevant things to mention in a letter, and the names and addresses of prominent government officials who would have responsibility over the detainee, as well as the names and addresses of local newspapers.

The effectiveness of a letter-writing campaign is difficult to judge. AI figures that about 50 percent of the time such a campaign can ease a prisoner's condition.

Father William Leone, pastor of Holy Redeemer Church and one of the priests in the network, said, however, that he considers his efforts a kind of "pure sacrifice," a duty undertaken without hope of reward.

The campaign, Father Ehmann said, is "basically implementing what Our Lord said about the sheep and the goats: 'When I was in prison, you visited me.' Can we let His words lie idle — act as if they don't apply?"

Father James Hewes, administrator of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Church, joined the priests network after reading the autobiography of Dr. Sheila Cassidy, the British physician who was arrested and tortured in Chile after she treated the wounds of an anti-government guerilla.

In reading her story, the priest said, "I learned that letters can really influence political people, can really have an effect on governmental people."

Father Ehmann said that the influence exerted is to assure "humane treatment of prisoners." He said, "There's no intent on the part of AI to try to get favors for condemned criminals."

The organization's published objectives are to work for the

Continued on Page 4



FATHER EHMANN FATHER HEWES FATHER LEONE



Sister Magdalena Kellner, S.S.J., chats with women in Buena Vista.

Tabasco Report: 1982

By Peter Voelkl

"I think I remember that pothole from last year!" I heard one of my fellow missionaries exclaim as our orange pickup slowly made its way down the severely cratered road that is the only way to the small Mexican town of Tamulte de las Sabanas. "Tamulte Trail," as the road came to be known, was only one of the problems our small contingent would have to deal with as each of us struggled to answer the question, "What do I really hope to accomplish here in Mexico?" It was a question that, for me, would take all of my six-week stay to answer.

Tamulte is a small town in the southern Mexican state of Tabasco. The population is composed predominantly of Chontal Indians, a group descended from the ancient Mayas. Tamulte is also a place where, for the third year in a row, missionaries from this diocese have been sent as one facet of the sister diocese relationship shared by the dioceses of Rochester and Tabasco. The program is coordinated by the diocesan Justice and Peace Commission under the direction of Lourdes Perez-Albuerne, who was one of the 16 in the mission team.

We had been eased into our mission experience first by orientation sessions in Rochester, and then by an overnight stay in Mexico City, but nothing could really have prepared those of us who were "first-timers" for the striking contrasts of Tamulte. As the pickup, borrowed from CICCODET, the Social Ministry arm of the Diocese of Tabasco, drove onto the grounds of St. Francis of Assisi parish, scores of people rushed to greet us. The rhythmic music of native drums announced our coming. The friendship of those who greeted us made it quite evident that the two earlier missions had left a lasting impression on Tamulte. As we stepped out of the truck, the pastor of the parish, Father Lucas Partida, greeted us warmly with the characteristic "abrazo," obviously happy his friends had returned.

As we looked around our new home we discovered that the living conditions, though far different from what we were used to in Rochester, were quite luxurious by the standards of Tamulte. The year before, the women had used the nuns' quarters, while the men had slept in the dispensary-examining room. This year a new wing had been added to the complex. In addition to separate rooms for the women and men, it also provided us with a "parlor" which we used for storage and for group prayer.

By Monday, three days after we arrived, the 11 of us who would compose the team for the first three-week period had begun to deal with the heat and all the assorted creatures who shared our living facilities. For better or worse this was to be our home. It was time to begin what we had come to do.

The mission was roughly divided into two phases. Five of us would remain only three weeks; the other six would be staying longer, to be joined by the second team of five in mid-July. The work ranged from teaching children some basic catechetical lessons and organizing Adult Bible Study, to some basic health classes, and an attempt to start an adult literacy program. We hoped to touch on both the spiritual and social program needs that are addressed so strongly in the pronouncements of the Latin American bishops.

In several cases the programs were quite successful. A people of strong but simple faith, many of the parishioners were interested in Bible study. As in the two years before, a biblical discussion session was held two days a week; this year presenting a program centered around the themes of the Creed and their scriptural basis. Though our original hope of training leaders to develop presentations for a year-round program never materialized, Marilyn Bennett Sister Marilyn Pray, Sister Mary Ann Mayer, and I were often amazed at the points people would raise.

Another program aimed at developing the spiritual side of the St. Francis community was the youth folk group. Directed by Barbara Fagan and Marilyn Bennett, it centered around training youths to lead the congregation in some of the lively Spanish songs used in the liturgy. As a sidelight to this, Marilyn and Barbara could often be found giving guitar lessons to two or three teenagers.

Whereas the folk group was geared toward the older youth, a session for the young children began every morning at 9:30. Tom Gowan, Amy McDonald and Walter Lalor ran the class for the first three weeks. They used Bible stories, drawing sessions, and songs. There was also a half-hour set aside for playing games in the park.

Working with the children was always a popular activity, and also one that could use as many helping hands as available. Barbara would bring her guitar whenever there was a song to be taught. Having worked with the children on the two previous missions, her experience proved to be quite useful. When Amy and Walter left and the second group arrived in July, Marianne Miserrandino and Valerie Smith took over the classes while Tom, who stayed for six weeks, moved into other areas.

In addition to the programs orientated toward the spiritual development of the parish, health instruction was a major concern. Mary Elizabeth Young, a public health nurse, assisted Walter, a health instructor at Ithaca College, and Michael Santantonio, a nursing student at the U. of R., in presenting three classes in this area. One, given as a followup

Continued on Page 4

Abortion to Be Senate Topic

The U.S. Senate is scheduled to debate and vote this week on the two most widely-known attempts to stem abortion on demand — the Helms Human Life Bill and the Hatch Human Life Amendment.

The Hatch Amendment, supported by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, must receive a two-thirds vote to pass the Congress and then has to be ratified by three-fourths of the states.

The diocesan Human Life Commission, through its Parish Contact System and the Courier-Journal, will pass on information and plans for contacting federal lawmakers.