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Faith Today

The inn on West Sheridan

By Father David Monahan
NC News Service

My checkbook reminds me that I wrote five checks on Christmas Eve, 1983. The last one has the simple description "Jesus House."

Walking back along the trail of my memory I recall that day.

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It is a typical day before Christmas for me — presents to be purchased, homilies not yet packaged, no gifts wrapped. Too little time for too many things. Unholy tension before a holy event.

My secretary agrees to help her panicky employer wrap some items in their proper Christmas brightness — if I can get the stuff to her home some 25 miles away.

Along the way I will deliver the check to Jesus House.

In mid-afternoon I park along Sheridan Avenue on the south side of Jesus House. It is bitter cold in Oklahoma City — below zero on the thermometer with a fierce numbing wind knifing through one's clothes. The wind chill factor tonight will be 47 below zero.

At the door I pass through a curtain woven of the odors of unwashed bodies and the cacaphony of jabbering tongues into a kingdom unfamiliar to a middle-class priest.

It is not a place of famine. Baskets of food are being toted. The oversized kitchen is bubbling with the evening meal.

By midnight 1,000 baskets of food will be given away. Several hundred more people will share in the energizing warmth of the spread right here.

I edge my way down the central hall. There is a white-bearded oldster slumped on a bench with the vacant eyes of a man pursuing dreams of Christmases past.

There is a young couple, stark as the Arkansas hills from which

they came, holding a baby with the sniffles. There is an American Indian man, face roughly chiseled by hard times, staring at the opposite wall.

This place is the reverse of the original event. Here there is room in the inn.

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Later this day there will be a unique Christmas party. The guest list includes an honor roll of street people — youngsters who threw away the good money when there was work to be had in the oil fields; a family newly arrived from Michigan; a waitress who shakes too much to continue in her occupation; a grizzled man who cannot recall his own name; and some 300 more battered sons and daughters of God.

There will be seasonal hymns sung. Prayers will be said and presents given — scarves, gloves, T-shirts, socks, toothpaste, maybe even swaddling clothes.

I ask the whereabouts of Sister Ruth and Sister Betty. I am referred to a door down the hall.

There sitting at a long table with other staff members are the two holy founders and managers of Jesus House. Sister Ruth sports bib overalls over a flannel shirt. Sister Betty, a splinter of quiet strength, is dressed in blue jeans and a plaid flannel shirt. Both heads are covered by bandanas.

Which religious community? As a matter of fact, none. Neither are Catholic, but they just may be saints.

Ruth Wynn and Betty Adams are alcoholics who have been walking on the sober side of the street for a long, long time.

A decade ago they began Jesus House as a chemical-abuse center for teen-agers. Jesus House has had a winding history through the unexpected. Always, though, it remained "an experiment in faith," says Sister Ruth. She further defines it as "a voluntary

therapeutic community."

The two put divine providence to the test. Life at Jesus House depends on voluntary contributions. Utility bills mount and gets scarce, but they trust God will provide. He does, and has through a remarkable series of hairbreadth escapes from cold and hunger.

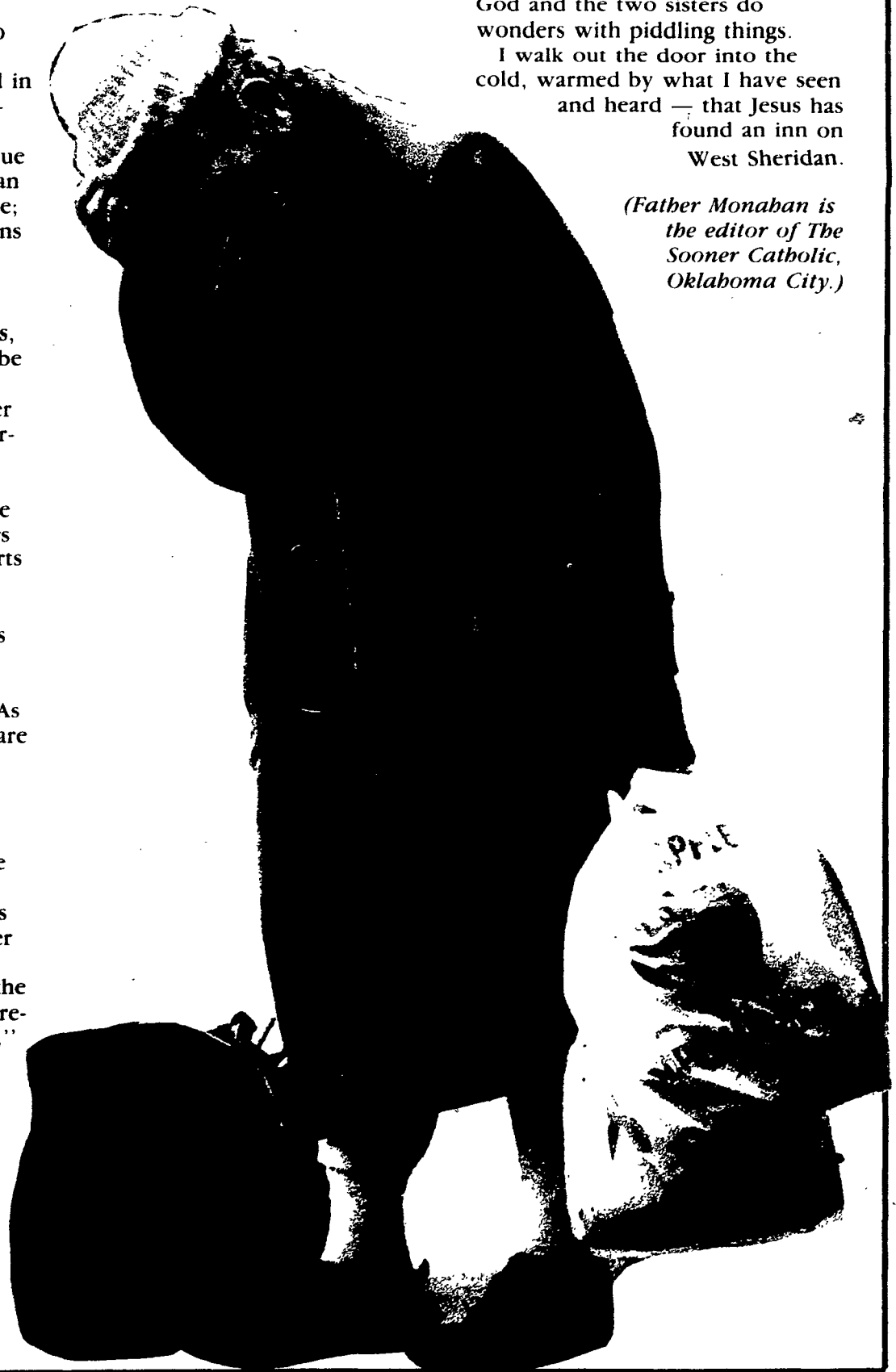
Jesus House has a considerable staff but no one receives a salary.

None can remember Sister Ruth or Sister Betty taking a day off. They share a room in the midst of their community. They are calm, prayerful people who promote frequent group worship.

I exchange greetings with the two sisters and hand them my check. It seemed large when I wrote it. Now, in the presence of so much need and in the presence of such huge hearts, the check has shrunk to almost nothing. But God and the two sisters do wonders with piddling things.

I walk out the door into the cold, warmed by what I have seen and heard — that Jesus has found an inn on West Sheridan.

(Father Monahan is the editor of *The Sooner Catholic*, Oklahoma City.)



On a chilling Christmas Eve, Father David Monahan found that the welcome mat was out at a shelter for the battered and bruised of Oklahoma City society. This time, he writes, there is room at the inn.

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