



House Simple

By Father David Monahan
NC News Service

Art and Marianne Mertens sat down with me in their comfortable living room for a late-afternoon interview.

Outside, the wind chill registered below zero. Inside, the wood-burning stove kept us toasty.

The split-level room was graced by a piano at one end. An antique table held coffee and cake.

But what about that sign built into the large picture window? "Your BankAmericard Welcome Here," it read — a clue that this house was different.

Different it is, just as the Mertens are different. They agreed before marriage that theirs would be the simple life.

A banner in the family room reads: "Live simply that others may simply live."

Mertens works for Neighbor for Neighbor, an emergency service organization for the poor. He picks up used furniture contributed by others, repairs it and distributes it. For his services he is paid \$727 monthly.

An additional \$320 comes from Social Security benefits for the two older children whose mother died when they were tiny.

Mrs. Mertens occasionally does adoption studies for a social-services agency. "Since July I've made a grand total of \$400," she said.

With an average income of \$1,100 a month, Art and Marianne must cover expenses for the family whose four children range in age from 7 to 16. During the school year, \$400 a month goes for tuition to the Catholic schools their children attend.

The Mertens built their home in a semirural, racially integrated section of Oklahoma County, north-east of Oklahoma City. They bought five acres of land at \$720 an acre, Mertens said.

They spent two years collecting building materials. "I bought salvage rights on three houses

from a company that had contracted for their removal with Urban Renewal," he explained.

Reinforcement for the foundation came from bars cut at local dumps and straightened by Mertens. The window with the BankAmericard sign came from a shop that was being demolished.

Construction lasted four years. "I did more than 90 percent of the work," Mertens said.

Finally the family had a solid eight-room house. "I hoped to build it for less than \$5,000," Mertens said. "It cost less than \$4,000."

The Mertens heat with two wood-burning stoves. Wood for the stoves comes from shipping pallets an electric company gives Mertens to dispose of.

"Buy in quantity" and when prices are low, is Mrs. Mertens' description of how the family obtains its food. "We have two big freezers, more than 50 feet of freezer space," she said. And their 70' x 70' garden supplements the Mertens' table.

"We get virtually all clothes from Neighbor for Neighbor," Mrs. Mertens said. "We don't buy things new if at all possible.

"We have old vehicles that Art keeps together with spit and glue," she added. The 1975 Plymouth and a 1972 van waved goodbye to 100,000 miles long ago.

How did this couple get into this frame of mind?

"When studying the Bible I became very aware of references Jesus made to the poor and the emphasis he put on being poor," Mertens said. "I think God calls some people to be poor in fact.

"We cannot see spending thousands on frivolities when so many people don't have necessities," he added.

A fringe benefit for Mrs. Mertens: "I sleep a lot better knowing we live this way."

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

Wearing

By Father John Castelot
NC News Service

St. Paul was in prison. Again. This time at Ephesus.

When Paul's converts in Philippi heard the news they were quite upset. The poor man! In jail!

They knew that conditions in Roman prisons were deplorable. In order to save the empire money, prisoners were given barely a subsistence diet. Paul's followers knew he must be uncomfortable, hungry and lonely.

So, hurriedly, Paul's followers prepared relief packages and sent a messenger to deliver them to their beloved apostle.

Paul wrote a thank you note, which is included in the New Testament Letter to the Philippians. In it he poured out his thanks for their concern, but he assured them that they really didn't have to go to all that trouble. He wrote: "I have learned how to cope with every circumstance — how to eat well or go hungry, to be well provided for or do without" (Philippians 4:12-13.)

Comm

By Father Robert Sherry
NC News Service

Let's sit in on a monthly meeting of the St. Anthony of Padua parish council. Though the parish and its meeting are imaginary, you will see that the members' discussion is true to life.

For six months parish council members have mulled over a question posed by the pastor, Father Miguel Solle: How can our parishioners lead a simpler life during Lent?

The pastor had asked council members to draw up a list of suggestions, based on their own experiences. He wants to publish the list in the parish bulletin and to talk about it in his homily the first Sunday of Lent.

Marilyn Farrell, liturgy coordinator, speaks first. "I personally believe that the Bible says all we need to hear about living a simple life. I suggest we compile several quotations from Scripture for the people to pray over during Lent. One for each of the 40 days."

Ms. Farrell adds that her favorite quotations are: "Tell those who are rich in this world's goods not to be proud, and not to rely on so uncertain a thing as wealth" (1 Timothy 6:17). Or, "Happy are you who are poor" (Luke 6:20).

The council president, Jim