

By Suzanne Elsesser
NC News Service

"Chicken and dressing, sweet potatoes, okra, greens, a roast, macaroni salad..." Sister Thea Bowman's voice was alive with excitement as she described the mountains of food on Easter Sunday at Fred and Arista Otto's home in Canton, Miss.

Children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, cousins, nieces and friends had attended the meal and, in fact, come by for dinner every Sunday.

"If you want to see anyone you go over there," said Sister Bowman, a Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration. "There's always food being kept warm in the oven or on top of the stove."

Sister Bowman is a consultant for intercultural communications in the Diocese of Jackson, Miss. She also is the editor of a collection of articles on the black Catholic family.

"When I was a little girl my mama wanted me to learn our heritage," she explains. "So she apprenticed me to a 'slave,' a freed woman who had lived during slavery and knew the traditions. I learned from her the stories, the songs, the great strengths that exist in families who are rooted in the African experience."

"To blacks the extended family is everything and it can often include people who are not related by blood but who need a family to care for them," she said. "We are most successful at being ourselves when we honor the extended family and the traditional African values of cooperation rather than competition."

Sister Bowman talks with great warmth about the Otto family as examples of the kind of affection and care a family can provide.

The Ottos raised 10 children. Later Mrs. Otto, whom everyone calls "Ma Dear," quit her daytime job so she could help raise her grandchildren. Now she works nights.

She says, "The job I had was plenty good but if I'm going to be a grandmother, I'm going to help my children."

Three preschool grandchildren stay with Mrs. Otto during the day while their mothers work. In the afternoon a school bus drops the older grandchildren at her home.

Her daughter, Myrtle Jean, is an acute-care technician at the University Medical Center in Jackson, Miss. She is the single parent of 5-year-old Charlene Evette and 7-year-old James Curtis; they all live with her parents because finances are tight.



Sundays with the Otto family

"We all help each other," Myrtle Jean explains. "What we have we share with each other. We have little fusses up and down but if someone needs food or money for utilities we all pitch in. Mama trained us to do it that way, even if we are far away. She's the sweetest thing in the world."

Years before Myrtle Jean helped raise her younger brothers and sisters when her father left a \$35 a week job to go to Kansas City for a better paying one.

Her older sister, Bernadette Porter, is the single parent of 10-year-old Stacey Monique who is cared for by Ma Dear. Ms. Porter too says her closeknit family is a big help.

Working in an office allows her to have a place of her own, but

she has to budget carefully. "It's not easy," she says. "Monique sees me sitting at the table saying, 'Now I don't have money for this or that.' That's good, because when she is older and if she goes to college and calls for money, she'll know why I don't have it."

Of any loneliness she has as a single parent, Ms. Porter says, "When I get depressed I come and talk to my mama."

And what does Mrs. Otto think she is giving her family?

"I hope I'm giving them good understanding," she says. "I take time out to listen. I get along with a lot of love."

(Ms. Elsesser is a free-lance writer in Larchmont, N.Y.)

What single pa

By Katharine Bird
NC News Service

At 5 p.m. they began coming in to the restaurant, sitting down around the table reserved for them. Some came hesitantly, hovering around the edges, waiting for an invitation before joining the group. Others walked in confidently, greeting friends with a smile and handshake.

There was an Irish woman much concerned about re-entering the job market after 15 years as wife and mother; a young man of Italian ancestry whose demeanor revealed his devastation at his broken marriage; a middle-aged black career woman convinced that her husband's hopes for a reconciliation wouldn't work.

That gathering five years ago brought together people of different backgrounds, educational levels and finances. Their common meeting ground: All were separated or divorced.

New to Washington, D.C., I attended that meeting to make contact with people in similar circumstances. A single parent of four children, it had taken me some time of stumbling in the dark to recognize how crucial the support of peers was.

For single parents face some special problems as well as special challenges:

The tale of the

By Father John Castelot
NC News Service

Jesus and his friends turned off the main road and started up a dusty path that led to the village of Naim. It was a wretched little cluster of mud huts at the top of the rise.

On their left as they walked along was the well, surrounded by milling sheep and the boys and girls who had just brought them in from the pasture.

All of a sudden the children's playful laughter stopped. Another sound took its place, the sound of professional mourners wailing and crying. They were escorting a funeral procession out of the village.

It was a very sad procession, for the corpse on the litter was that of a young man, "the only son of a widowed mother" (Luke 7:12).

Sensing the poignancy of the situation, Jesus, "moved with pity," said to the mother: "Do not cry."

How easy to say! Anyone in the group could have muttered, "What a dumb remark!" Here was a widow who had only one son to

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