

Beyond poverty, sickness, and sorrow, a healing holiness

By Teresa A. Parsons



ast weekend, the people of Assisi House claimed Jesus, child of poverty, as one of their own.

At first glance, the pageant they presented at St. Anthony of Padua Church on Saturday afternoon appeared no different from what goes on in hundreds of churches at Christmastime. The classic Christmas story contained no surprises. Nor was there anything outstanding about the quality of the candlelight or the music and dancing.

What made this pageant special were the people who took part. None of them had to imagine Mary and Joseph's weariness as they wandered Bethlehem's streets, their isolation as outsiders for whom no one would make room, or their sorrow and frustration at failing to provide the best for their child.

For the people who frequent the storefront on Lyell Avenue, those are daily realities. It was an unaccustomed sense of holiness and goodness that caught them unaware as they were transformed into angels and shepherds and wise men, leaving behind for an hour or two the addictions, mental illnesses, poverty, and despair that ordinarily plague their lives.

"People told me they couldn't believe they could really do this," said Paula Dumont, director of Assisi House. "For many of them, moments of joy and fun have always come with getting drunk. This good feeling is something they've never experienced before."

No transformation, not even an impending one, was evident at rehearsal Friday evening. Instead, it was an ordeal from beginning to end. The temperature in the church was bone-chilling, the head angel didn't show up with the music, and Joseph got nervous and disappeared less than halfway through, leaving Mary alone on the altar. For most of the evening, one young angel ran around and around the church screaming like a banshee.

On the other hand, the group was blessed with a wonderfully cooperative Mary and Jesus. Even after more than two hours in the cold church, three-month-old Ralph Edward Sutton Jr., never uttered a peep of protest. Neither did his mother, Gwen Watkins. As she held her child close under his layers of wrapping, she wore a smile as gentle and radiant as that of any Madonna.

On Saturday, even the banshee angel seemed to feel the difference as she sat quietly on the altar steps during "Silent Night."

"It was a small miracle," Dumont said. "The Lord must've hit her with the Holy Spirit."

This is Assisi House's second Christmas pageant. Only about 10 people participated in the first one last year. "It was crazy and a little zany," Dumont said, "but the people loved it."

This year, so many people overcame their initial shyness and volunteered that she had to move the event around the corner to St. Anthony's Church. For the final performance, there were more people on the altar than in the audience.

Dumont, who describes herself as a quasi-contemplative, said that she conceived the idea for a pageant in prayer.

"I was asking the Lord Jesus how I could help these people experience the joy of His coming and of His love for them," she recalled. "Then I thought of St. Francis of Assisi, who was a great lover of song and dance and festivities as well as a patron of the poor and the sick. He created the first creche, and so I thought why not try a living creche?"

From the time she arrived at Assisi House more than a year ago, Dumont began incorporating simple movements and gestures into daily prayer services.

"It's a multi-dimensional way of teaching and healing and celebrating the fact that we are all God's people," she explained. "I would



Each of their movements were prayers in action as shepherd Christy Dumont (rear), wise man Jesse Nava (center), and the innkeeper's daughter, portrayed by Anastasia Chiarenza (front), danced before the infant Jesus.



Assisi House director Paula Dumont (right) and Elvie Chiarenza (left) led the heavenly host in a simple set of gestures which accompanied the hymn "Silent Night." Both Dumont and Chiarenza are members of Shalom, a liturgical dance group based in Henrietta.

kid the people afterward and say, "Wouldn't you like to do that in a pageant?" To my surprise, I had some takers."

With help from fellow members of the Shalom liturgical dance group, based in Henrietta, Dumont gradually began working with individuals who expressed interest in the pageant. One of their star pupils was Jesse Nava, who portrayed a wise man this year. Although he had never danced in public before, Nava performed a graceful duet with 11-year-old Anastasia Chiarenza of Henrietta.

"He went through and prayed about all his movements," Dumont said. "He was frustrated because what he felt inside got stuck on the way out ... but he really liked it."

Sam Ferguson was equally serious about portraying Joseph. "Joseph doesn't really know everything, he doesn't understand everything, but he believes in everything

good," he said. "In this age of spectacular and magnificent things, we don't always recognize or appreciate the value of quiet belief and acceptance. Joseph's was one of those silent voices."

Since it opened six years ago as an outreach of St. Francis of Assisi Parish on Whitney Street, Assisi House has been a place where those who felt worthless could discover their talents and use them. Over the years, staff members have offered hospitality as well as programs for worship, advocacy and self-help through such groups as Alcoholics Anonymous and Al-Anon.

But the distinction between those who give and those who receive help has never been very clear there. Dumont's daughter, Christy, a Nazareth Academy freshman who volunteers at Assisi House several days a week, initially expected that she would do most of the



The real Joseph could hardly have been more protective than Sam Ferguson, who seldom turned his eyes away from Ralph Edward Sutton Jr. and his mother, Gwen Watkins, who took the parts of Mary and Jesus.

giving. "I've found that they've given me a lot more," she said.

"We so often overlook the fact that these people really want to be part of a community," her mother added. "They belong to Christ. His life is warm and beautiful in them, but is covered up by hurt and dysfunction. Things like this are tiny lights that say we as a Church want them, accept them and love them, and that we know Christ does."

Despite the tremendous amount of time and effort the pageant requires, Dumont has no doubt that Assisi House will put on another one next year. Already, she's looking ahead, hoping to make it an even more prayerful teaching experience for everyone involved.

"It makes you feel Christmas," she said. "It's really a Christmas present to yourself."

How to tell Santa what you want for Christmas

First you need a Santa, and a lap. Then you give him a hug! And Santa will say Ho Ho Ho, Merry Christmas! Then he will ask you what you want for Christmas. And you tell him what you want for Christmas. Now you are done telling what you want for Christmas.

Katie O'Sullivan
St. John, Humboldt
Grade 3

How to decorate a Christmas tree

"Can I decorate the Christmas tree," said David.

"Yes," said David's mother.
"Hurray!" said David.

David went and got the ornaments. The first one he put up was Santa. The second one he put up was Rudolph. The third was one of Santa's Elves. The last one of course was the star.

Jason Holton
St. John, Humboldt
Grade 2

How to make a fruitcake

You need 200 eggs and four boxes of butter. You will need 13 pounds of flour. You will need a big bowl. You will need a big spoon to stir. It will be done when it bubbles at 100 degrees.

Bryan Cookrey
St. John, Humboldt
Grade 2

How to make a fruitcake

You need two gallons of milk. It serves about 20 people. Put in 50 eggs, two bottles of shortening, 10 bananas, five pineapples and 30 oranges. Put it in the oven for 400 degrees. There you have it — a triple double fruitcake!

Michael Crowe
St. John, Humboldt
Grade 2