



# Deacon-doctor tends range of ailments

By Rob Cullivan

Placing the pictures of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Blessed Virgin Mary on her lap, the gray-haired woman smiled and took the physician's hands in her own. Her dark eyes blinked, punctuating her phrases, as she spoke of her devotion to the Lord. Again and again she said, "I love Him. I just love Him so much!"

Dr. Fernando V. Ona shook his head affirmatively. "Margaret is a very faith-filled person," he said, looking at the woman, Margaret Arieno, one of the two residents at Mount Carmel House on Rochester's Planet Street.

Every Thursday evening, Ona leaves St. Mary's Hospital, where he works as a gastroenterologist, and drives to Mount Carmel House to stay overnight. At any one time, the house is home to two terminally ill patients who are unable to afford the care they need, and whose families have neither the time nor the money to provide care for them.

Mount Carmel House was the brain-child of Ona and several others, including Rose Grossi, a member of the Rochester Lay Carmelites, and Father Jack Healy, the house chaplain. The Carmelites purchased the original house which opened in July of 1984 at its former location on Lorimer Street in Rochester. Last October, the hospice reopened at its current, more spacious location.

Since Mount Carmel House opened, Ona has witnessed children reconciled with their father, and an alleged murderer reconciled with his God. Despite his busy schedule, Ona rarely misses his Thursday night stays. "I believe I need to get my hands dirty," he remarked. Getting his hands dirty to cleanse the bodies and souls of the dying has inspired the physician's faith. He cited the house's volunteer staff, which consists of non-professionals, physicians, nurses and nurses' aides, for their dedication. "This is the real pulse of the Church," he said, "finding people who are so committed."

Ona himself has displayed great commitment to the house, a commitment that has been paid back with the joy of seeing those in danger of a sad death being relieved of their sorrow. The house's first resident was a former maintenance man whose wife couldn't afford to quit her job to take care of him when he was diagnosed with a terminal illness.

The patient's condition strained his relationship with his son and his daughter, who were unable to cope with its implications. Over a year, they became distant from their father. Finally, as a priest was administering the sacrament of the sick, the son came in to see his father.

When the priest anointed the father's head with oil, the container top came off and the oil spilled all over the dying man. The son proceeded to rub the oil into his father's skin and he sighed in return. It was the first time the son had touched his father in a year, Ona said. Eventually, the father was also reconciled with his daughter, who was persuaded by the house staff to visit him.

Mount Carmel House has effected other changes of heart. A prisoner held in Monroe County Jail on charges of murdering his wife had terminal cancer. Father Edward Dillon, an acquaintance of Ona's, suggested that the prisoner might be a candidate for Mount Carmel House, so Ona went to the jail to visit him.

Regulations restricted the flow of medications into the jail's infirmary, and the prisoner wasn't receiving the proper amount of painkillers. The diocese bailed the man out of jail and transferred him to Mount Carmel House. Ona recalled that the man was overwhelmed by the care he was given. "After two or three weeks (at the house) he said, 'I cannot believe it. You are all angels walking around here.'" The man, who was never brought to trial, died in peace, Ona noted.

Creating a peaceful atmosphere is the reasoning behind Ona's weekly visits. Grossi noted that the patients feel more secure knowing there's a physician in the house. Many of the residents have led a life of hardship, and they respond to the physician's gentle manner, she said.

Arieno is among those who has benefited from the doctor's care. "When you're with him, you feel like you've got a good doctor," she said. "He's not one of these types that'll tire you out." The first impression Ona created was a good one for his patient. "You can tell right away that he's one who wants to do everything he can for you."

Doing everything he can means following a set routine on Thursdays. After arriving at the home, Ona greets everyone and prays. He then visits each patient, looks at their charts and performs any related duties, such as changing their clothes or giving the patients their medication. He always makes a point to hold each patient's hands and to talk to them about their day.



Dr. Fernando V. Ona spends time with Margaret Arieno, a resident at Mt. Carmel House in Rochester, during one of his Thursday night visits.

"Touch is a big, big thing," he said.

Ona touches people in another way — as a deacon at St. Helen Church in Rochester. Among his duties is visiting parishioners who have recently been released from the hospital. The physician notes that his diaconal work is the natural extension of his medical practice, as he works to heal people's souls as well as their bodies.

The health of his fellow deacons is also a concern to Ona, who directs the diocese's ministry to its deacons and their spouses. He organized Deacon Wellness Day last June to present informational workshops on mental and physical health, and examinations in St. Mary's Hospital Auditorium. His wife, Celia, also a physician, participated in the workshops, which included eye care screening, cholesterol testing and lectures on stress management and general health practices. Ona also put together a reception for pastors and deacons last April at the Canandaigua Sheraton Inn and is currently working on plans for one in April of 1989.

His dual concerns for others' spiritual and physical well-being united when he helped organize the diocese's Catholic Physicians Guild in the early 1980s. Named the guild's first president, Ona now serves as spiritual adviser to the 90-member organization. The guild organizes retreats to help Catholic physicians explore such moral dilemmas as those presented by advanced life-prolonging technology.

Some of those dilemmas also present themselves at Mount Carmel House. Ona said that the hospice staff must provide basic foods and liquids to each patient to support them insofar as ordinarily possible. Medication is given to relieve pain, not hasten death, he emphasized, but



A well-worn prayer book and pictures of various saints rest close by Margaret Arieno's side.

the house takes its cue from papal pronouncements stating that "extraordinary means" do not have to be used to extend a patient's life. Ona acknowledged, however, that the difference between extraordinary and ordinary methods can be hard to define at times.

Clearly extraordinary were the circumstances that brought Ona and his wife to live in the

United States. Born in the Philippines, the two doctors studied medicine here and were going to return to the Philippines in 1972 when Filipino president Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law. Ona's family in the Philippines advised him to stay in the United States, where he has since lived.

Ona considers it providential that he found himself in this country, given his current opportunities to helping others through his various activities. Yet, he and his wife still long to return to the Philippines some day. Nonetheless, he believes "the Holy Spirit really works very well" in calling people to offer their gifts where they are most needed. His patients would probably agree.

## Fireworks to culminate New Year's Mass, party

Father John Mulligan, moderator of the pastoral office, will be the chief celebrant at a New Year's Eve Mass to be held at St. Mary's Church, downtown Rochester. The Mass will begin at 9:30 p.m., and will be followed by a party which will culminate with the City of Rochester's annual fireworks display.

Members of the Baptist Temple congregation will participate in the evening. Holiday music will be provided by the Baptist Temple Choir and St. Mary's Adult Choir, accompanied by St. Mary's organist Phillip Lioi, cantor Lynda Cullen and trumpet-player Ray Grosswirth.

The party is free and open to the community. It will begin in the Lower Level Community Center of St. Mary's immediately following the Mass.

Linda Dow Hayes, Courier-Journal