



Help for healing far

By Paula Dumont
Guest contributor

It was a usual day: the room overcrowded with hungry, angry, tired people waiting for food or for someone with whom to share their grievances — usually about welfare. My workers and I were stretched to the limit, trying to be generous of heart, of time and services, but with too little money and too few staff members.

I walked into the waiting room, where the dank smell of whiskey and sweat hung in the heat. Two men sprawled, half asleep, in overstuffed chairs, while three others debated some mutual grievance.

A young child lay on the floor, rolling about and whining. Her older brother darted around her on his knees, tormenting her while skillfully dodging his mother's arm. The boy was oblivious to demands that he "sit down and shut up."

The mother, restricted by an infant balanced precariously on her pregnant belly, raised her demands to a scream and finally managed to swat the boy on the side of his head with her hand.

I glanced down and called the name written on the chart. The mother rose and yelled at the boy to smarten up and come on. At the same time, she reached down and grabbed the arm of the small girl, dragging her toward me.

This woman had come to us several times for food. I was surprised to see her so alert since I knew she used heroin and other drugs, and was in trouble with the law. She had confided to me that her husband was a drug dealer who abused her and the children regularly. I was well aware, after hours of talking with her, that denial and resistance to change were a large part of her life.

Therefore, I was not prepared when she looked straight at me and said, "Something you said to me last time made sense. I don't even know exactly what you said, but it was something like, 'Isn't it time you face the fact that you're an addict, and give God some space to work in your life?'"

"Well," she continued, "I snuck in the back of church at Mass time two days ago — you know my ma was Catholic when I was a kid. Well, anyway, I didn't feel part of those people in there, but something happened inside me. You might say that for the first time since I was a little girl, I felt part of something warm and good and caring, and I guess I want to call that, whatever it was, God."

"I went back again to Mass the next day, and it was like when I was little and used to go over my aunt's house in the country and walk in the fields and look at the flowers. I used to name them flowers as my family members.

The prettiest ones were those folks who were good to me, and the weeds and briars were those folks who hurt me. I would pick the pretty flowers and just sit with them, touching them, noticing every nice thing about them, and you know I would feel so good and warm inside. I felt a little of that in the church.

"Well," she went on, "all this is to say I'm ready. I want to go into a rehab center. I am willing to let my kids go for a while, even if I don't trust welfare and their foster homes. I know I got to get away from all this for a while. You just got to help me get in somewhere and then you got to promise me you will make sure my kids are OK while I'm away from them."

The woman — I'll call her "Abby" — entered a facility within the next two weeks. She spent three months in intensive treatment, another six months in a living center to make the transition back to the community, and three months more in a community residence. During this time, she delivered a healthy baby girl who was allowed to stay with her.

We kept in contact with Abby, and with her three other children, who did very well in foster care. We were with Abby when she left the rehab facility almost a year after beginning treatment. She chose to move to an area where she could continue to see us and share with us.

The spiritual awakening that stirred Abby and moved her toward health continues to do so. Two-and-a-half years later, her spiritual life is growing, along with her ability to relate to the world in healthy ways. She has continued out-patient care

The power of Jesus' passion and death can be seen in the recovery process — a journey from living death during which the spiritual and mental state of self-negation is destroyed.

To protect the privacy of people with whom Paula Dumont has ministered, "Abby" and "Jenny," who are mentioned in our Insight feature, represent composites of individuals with whom Dumont has dealt during the past five years in her ministry at Theresa Friendship Center and Assisi House.

Both programs began as storefront outreaches: Assisi House on Lyell Avenue, sponsored by St. Francis of Assisi Parish; and Theresa Friendship Center on Chili Avenue, with help from St. Augustine's. In June, 1989, after St. Augustine's had voted to close St. Theresa's for financial reasons, the center moved down the street to St. Stephen's Episcopal Church.

Dumont, who is the newly appointed chaplain at Rochester's Monroe Developmental Center, has worked for more than 20 years in the field of recovery from addiction. She is currently writing a dissertation on the topic of ministry to the marginalized and addicted, as she works toward a doctorate in ministry from Colgate/Rochester Divinity School.

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