

Missioners evangelize by meeting people's needs

Continued from page 1

stating this tenet, however, the church was forced to view mission activity as more than seeking converts — although that remains a part of the mission goal, he said.

While acknowledging that salvation is available outside the church, the church insists it has something unique to offer, Father Frazier said.

"What we can offer to these people for whom God's salvation is available is the Gospel," the priest explained. "The Gospel sheds an insight on the shape of the salvation that is available to the world at large. Without (the Gospel), it would be easy enough to misconstrue the salvation that's being offered to them."

In addition, noted Sister Margaret Loftus, SND, director of the United States Catholic Mission Association, the church can offer Jesus Christ.

"God's been there (in mission lands) before us," observed Sister Loftus in a telephone interview with the *Catholic Courier*. "We go (to mission lands) to discover how the absolute beauty and truth and goodness which is the Godhead is revealed there. We go there with the great treasure that is Jesus Christ and we share that."

Since salvation is available to all, missionaries now must be open to learning what the people themselves have to offer, noted Sister Anne Curtis, RSM, who served as a missionary in Santiago, Chile, between 1986 and 1990.

"You don't go down with a sense, with an attitude that you have a master plan you are sent with," Sister Curtis said. "You listen to what the people want and need, and you build around that."

During her time in Chile, for example, Sister Curtis helped establish a women's center in response to needs voiced by the Chilean women. At the center, women could meet for classes and workshops on such topics as domestic violence and job skills.

Helping people meet their basic needs is a vital part of missionary activities, Sister Curtis observed. "You don't tell people to pray to God, then let them go hungry."

In fact, helping to meet basic needs often becomes a starting point for evangelization, noted Sister Jean Bellini, SSJ, who currently serves at the Brazilian mission operated by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester.

"It's building the foundation for later,



File photo
Dr. Tom Dooley held a sick child at one of the hospitals he founded to serve the world's poor. Dooley, who died in 1961 at the age of 34, is often cited as a model for missionary activity among lay people.

more explicit evangelization," Sister Bellini noted in a telephone interview with the *Catholic Courier*.

Sister Bellini's ministry consists of helping squatters — settlers who try to establish claims to unowned lands — in the State of Macogrosa. In that work, she helps the squatters overcome legal hurdles and the opposition of large landowners; join appropriate landowner unions; and survive the difficult first years of raising their own food. Often, she noted, she simply provides support and encouragement.

"All of the people say — if you ask them who supports the squatters — they would say the church," Sister Bellini explained.

Once missionaries establish relationships with the people, Sister Bellini added, then catechesis can begin.

But in his encyclical, Pope John Paul II warned about a danger of entangling mis-

sionary work in social ministry.

"The temptation today is to reduce Christianity to merely human wisdom, a pseudoscience of well-being," the pope wrote.

Although the Holy Father cautioned missionaries against focusing solely on the human level, he did not exclude social ministry from missionary activity, Father Frazier observed.

Rather, the priest said, the mission encyclical and other papal statements have called for attention to people's social needs while simultaneously emphasizing Christ and the Kingdom.

"There has been a strong encouragement for the church to apply the Gospel to social and political conditions and to try to witness to the importance of building a society that is just," Father Frazier said. "It's just that not everything should be reduced to that — that not everything be leveled to social and political situations."

Even without overt political action, missionaries' efforts to support people is a way of promoting social change and of preaching without saying a word, Sister Curtis acknowledged.

"We are a visible presence and sign of the church," she pointed out. "It's not that you just appear on weekends; you are there day-to-day."

A key part of missionary activity today is "immersion," Sister Curtis said.

"We live immersed in the neighborhood with the people," Sister Curtis said. "I think that's an essential aspect of mission. You're there shoulder-to-shoulder with them."

Consequently, such activities as talking about family problems or going shopping can be a means of preaching, she observed.

In addition to this changing conception of missionary work, a shift also is taking place in the understanding of who can be a missionary, Sister Loftus remarked.

One of the most significant changes, she observed, is that "the number of laity that are on mission has been increasing in the last 10 years."

Recalling the Vatican II declaration that all people are called to serve the church by virtue of their baptism, Sister Loftus noted that many religious congregations came to feel a responsibility to share their missions

with the laity.

In response to the council challenge, Sister Loftus said, a number of congregations have added programs that are open to lay people.

Meanwhile, lay people are increasingly looking for opportunities to serve, noted Sister Margaret Nacke, CSJ, a member of the executive board of the International Liaison of Lay Volunteers in Mission.

Sister Nacke said her group — which serves as an umbrella for 150 organizations — has seen an increase in requests for its list of missionary opportunities from 50,000 in 1990 to more than 70,000 thus far in 1991.

Most of the people seeking such information are interested in opportunities within the United States, as opposed to other countries, Sister Nacke observed.

The idea of mission territory within the United States is not a new one; it simply hasn't been part of our traditional understanding of missionary work, noted David Byers, executive director of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Missions.

"There are parts of the country which have always been considered mission country," Byers said.

Byers cited, for example, the number of priests and women religious from Mexico serving in many parts of the country — including the Diocese of Rochester.

In addition, Byers observed, a number of U.S. congregations continue to operate missions in such parts of the country as the South, the Southwest and Alaska. Among these home missions is at which Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester have worked for many years in rural Alabama.

Sister Anne Urquhart, SSJ, served in Alabama from 1983-91. Although the Catholic population there is very small, the region is Christian, Sister Urquhart noted. Thus the focus of missionaries there is not conversion, but such activities as teaching, providing health care and training catechists, she said.

"If evangelization happens in that process, that's important," Sister Urquhart said. "But evangelization might happen as a result of the kinds of activity we're engaged in with the people."

Amid such positive assessments of missionary work's current direction, however, decreasing numbers of missionaries to foreign lands cause concern, Father Frazier said.

Indeed, according to figures from the Mission Association, the number of U.S. missionaries to foreign lands has decreased from a peak of 9,655 in 1968 to the current figure of 5,595.

In his encyclical Pope John Paul cited a similar problem occurring across the world. "Missionary activity specifically directed 'to the nations' (*ad gentes*) appears to be waning, and this tendency is certainly not in line with the directives of the (Vatican) council and of subsequent statements of the magisterium," he wrote.

The cause for this decline is not clear, Father Frazier said. Yet he added, "I think mission consciousness in the country is at a low level. By and large, people are rather insensitive to the centrality of mission in the church."

The Holy Father's encyclical calls for a new emphasis on missionary activity to counter this decline — and for the good of the church.

"Missionary activity renews the church, revitalizes the faith and Christian identity, and offers fresh enthusiasm and new incentive," the pope wrote.

And, Sister Loftus noted, Catholics still have a message that all people need to see and hear.

"I have seen with Christians the joy and hope that seem to be associated with Christianity," Sister Loftus said. "We are redeemed. We are loved. That is our message to people."

Obituary

Sister Carmelita McMahon, SSJ, at 83; taught in Ogdensburg diocese, served in Rochester

Sister Carmelita McMahon, SSJ, who taught in the Ogdensburg diocese for 53 years before coming to the Sisters of St. Joseph in 1979, died at St. Joseph Convent Infirmary on Monday, Oct. 7, 1991. She was 83 years old.

Monsignor William H. Shannon celebrated a Mass of Christian Burial for Sister Carmelita in the motherhouse chapel on Oct. 10. Monsignor Shannon was assisted by Father John McMahon of Tampa, Fla., a cousin of Sister Carmelita.

A native of Pittsburgh, Pa., Sister Carmelita entered the Sisters of St. Joseph of Watertown in 1925. She attended St. Mary's Business School in Pittsburgh, and Immaculate Heart of Mary Academy in Watertown. She earned her master's degrees from Duquesne and Villanova universities in Pennsylvania. She majored in both biology and geology.

Sister Carmelita taught elementary and high school in the Ogdensburg diocese for more than five decades. Among the schools in which she taught were: Sacred

Heart, St. Patrick, Holy Family Junior High, Immaculate Heart of Mary Academy, all of Watertown; St. Mary's High School, Ogdensburg, and Augustinian Academy, Carthage, Holy Family High School, Massena.

In 1974 she became the registrar and director of admissions at Mater Dei College in Ogdensburg, where she served until 1979.

Later that same year Sister Carmelita transferred to the Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester. She worked in the secretarial department for several years until she moved to St. Joseph Convent Infirmary for health reasons.

Sister Carmelita is survived by one sister, Elizabeth Gross of Verona, Pa.; one brother, Bernard McMahon of Pittsburgh, Pa.; as well as several nieces and nephews and the Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester and Watertown.

Interment was in the sisters' section of Holy Sepulchre Cemetery.