

# Deacon feels call to aid poor

"... I was ill and you comforted me ..." (Mt. 25:36).

"I assure you, as often as you did it for one of my least brothers and sisters, you did it for me." (Mt. 25:40).

By Deacon Fernando V. Ona, M.D.  
Guest contributor

To recognize the faces of Jesus among our sisters and brothers whose faces have been scarred and spoiled by the ugliness of violence, homelessness, disease and poverty, is a difficult and challenging task.

Yet, in faith, we realize that Jesus indeed identified with the poor and the dejected.

The church teaches the faithful the principle of the "preferential option for the poor." In his address to the bishops of Brazil in 1980, Pope John Paul II described this option for the poor as "a call to have a special openness with the small and weak, those that suffer and weep, those that are humiliated and left on the margins of society, so as to help them win their dignity as human persons and children of God."

For me, this call to serve Jesus among the poor has been a strong and irresistible invitation. I find that to reach out to them has been a source of fulfillment and a truly rewarding experience. I believe that the poor make me understand my own vulnerability and helplessness in the light of God's unconditional love and compassion.

My desire to be open to Jesus' call is hard to explain. My parents had always taught me to be mindful of the poor, to share whatever resources we have and to remember that our talents and possessions are all gifts from God. I remember how my parents reached out to those in need in our community. They helped me become sensitive to other people's needs.

When I was a medical student, I started volunteering in the free clinic sponsored by the parish church. I worked with the older physician who taught me more about compassionate care than what I learned in medical school. I cherished those wonderful experiences of making the most of the barest facilities available in the clinic. The honor of being thanked and the smiles and genuine handshakes of gratitude by patients seen in the clinic left me with an inde-



Deacon Fernando V. Ona, M.D., has this photograph of a starving child on his office door at St. Mary's Hospital in Rochester.

libile desire to carry on with this work.

When I came to Rochester, the inspiration for me to serve Jesus among the poor continued to be strong.

In February, 1977, with the support and unselfish approval of my wife, Celia, and our two boys, Eric and Mel, I volunteered to join the Medical Mission sponsored by the Care-Medico Program. For one month, I served in Kabul, Afghanistan, as a volunteer visiting specialist. I taught the young medical graduates in Kabul the state of the art and practice of medicine. I joined the local physicians in caring for the indigent population who were hospitalized in their government hospitals and those who were afflicted with tuberculosis and various pulmonary disorders in their TB clinics.

My experience in Kabul was blessed by the inspiring example of the Little Sisters of Jesus, a congregation inspired by Charles de Foucauld. The sisters worked as nurses in the hospital, and they lived out their lives of simplicity by living among the poor Afghans in the slums of Kabul.

My trip to Kabul was complicated by the loss of my entire luggage containing my clothing and the medical supplies for donation. Indeed, that was an involuntary way of following the gospel message of not carrying the traveling

bags or walking staff. That February was one of the most memorable and rewarding experiences of my life.

In 1981, during my early years of formation in the permanent diaconate program, I was invited to join Sister Sharon Bailey, SSJ, and Donna DelSanto in working as the medical volunteer at Corpus Christi Center, 142 Webster Ave. I spent one afternoon every week at the center seeing patients with a variety of general medical problems. This was different from my usual job as consultant in gastroenterology at St. Mary's Hospital.

As a general practitioner, I found the volunteer work at Corpus Christi a real challenge. Thanks to the guidance of the Spirit, I was able to stretch my skills and knowledge to meet the demands of the health-care needs of those who fall through the cracks.

I recall the difficulties of examining our patients who smelled of alcohol or from lack of personal hygiene, or who were stoned on drugs. In addition, the center's ventilation was almost nonexistent. The North Atlantic Fisheries was located next door. I had to always remind myself that Jesus was present in the person of the patients I was examining.

After serving Corpus Christi Center, my wife and I became involved in helping establish a home for dying people who are homeless and poor. With the overwhelming generosity and indefatigable assistance of Raoul and Rose Grossi and Father Jack Healy — as well as the support of several members from the Rochester lay Carmelites and community volunteers — Mt. Carmel House opened July 16, 1984.

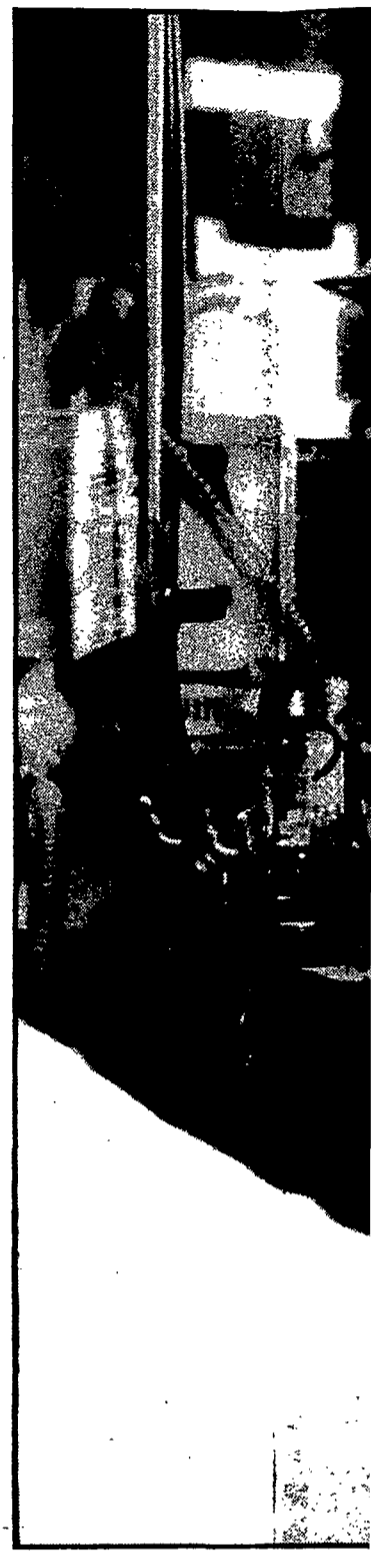
At Mt. Carmel House, 4 Planet St., all services and hospitality are offered free of charge. The patients, for the remaining months of their lives, are assured of warm and loving care provided by committed volunteers who regard their services as a privilege and as a way of exercising charity deepened and sustained by private and group prayer.

I enjoy working at Mt. Carmel House as the medical director and as a volunteer every Thursday evening. To date, we have served up to 90 guests/patients whose lives have touched our lives in so many wonderful ways.

I recall Ed, who was dying from lung cancer that had spread to his bones, causing him severe pain. I asked to see him in Monroe County



Deacon Ona comforts Scott Lester, a patient at Mt. Carmel House in Rochester, during an afternoon visit July 16.



During morning rounds at St. Mary's Hospital, Deacon Ona and his friends during one of his visits to St. Peter's Kitchen in Rochester.



The St. Mary's physician and his friends during one of his visits to St. Peter's Kitchen in Rochester.

Photos

by

Kelle McC...

## Insight