

The Journey to Bethlehem

Luke's Gospel narrative of Jesus' birth starts with Joseph and Mary's journey to Bethlehem "upon decree of the Emperor Augustus."

With reflection on this brief account, we see the hardship forced upon the couple: Joseph's disrupted livelihood; Mary's physical discomfort; exposure to harsh weather and the prospect of criminal attack; no friends or relatives awaiting their arrival.

Political, social, and economic structures today also displace individuals and families who must seek the assistance of strangers. Immigrants and refugees are an obvious parallel, but also displaced are those made homeless by long-term unemployment, mental illness, substance abuse and combinations of these factors. Many find themselves with nowhere to go and literally end up knocking on the door of a Catholic church or agency.

Christmas Appeal funds often allow parish staff and Catholic human-care service professionals to extend assistance. Thanks to support of this fund, these modern-day counterparts of the innkeeper in Bethlehem are able to show the needy and the community that the church is a place where all people are welcomed and valued and where their troubles will find a compassionate response.

It is expected that 22,000 people will seek the assistance of Christmas Appeal this year. More than 3,800 will need some kind of help to find shelter. Only a few of their stories follow:

■ A fire claimed all the possessions of the six-

member Stevens family, who lacked insurance. They have relocated to an apartment, but need several items beyond their means to make it livable.

■ The Tehkonens are an extended family. Job layoffs greatly reduced their household income and forced them to move to a low-rent and high-crime area. When a daughter was assaulted this autumn, the family began a frantic search for a safer neighborhood. They need \$150 more to cover the security deposit on the new apartment they found.

■ Fearing they would lose their chance to come to the United States, the parents of 2-year old Thuy abruptly took him out of the hospital where he was being treated for a burn accident. Thuy arrived here from the Philippines with severe burns on his feet. After eight months of skin grafts and physical therapy, he is on the mend physically. Now his family needs many household items so that they can concentrate on settlement.

■ A young man with a mental disability has been discharged into a Southern Tier community. His Social Security payments are insufficient to cover rent and a security deposit. Several area agencies are willing to provide a portion of the amount needed, so \$50 more from the Christmas Appeal will secure an apartment for him.

■ Natives of Bangladesh, a couple left their homeland with their two children, hoping to make a better life in the United States where they had been educated. The husband was a public health administrator in Bangladesh, and the wife



was a kindergarten aide. They are in this country on visitors' visas and are seeking employment that would permit them to stay. Their savings are dwindling and they have turned to their parish here for help through this crisis.

■ Bonnie and Clarence both suffer from chronic psychiatric disorders that seriously impede their ability to earn a living. Nevertheless, they are working hard to provide a happy, nurturing home for their two preschool children. Family holidays hold special meaning for them because such occasions were rare during their own childhoods. These parents would appreciate help to make Christmas festive.

■ A disabled veteran and his 14-year-old son need repairs to their roof. Water is ruining their ceilings and creating an electrical hazard. A Christmas Appeal grant of \$200 would allow the Bishop Sheen Ecumenical Housing Foundation to pay the balance of the repair cost.

■ Long-term unemployment caused the Pontes to lose their house. They moved into a mobile home, but now find that it needs a new gas line for safe heating and cooking. With a low-paying job and old debt still to pay, the Pontes cannot afford the \$750 bill for installation of the gas line.

■ Bud and Mary are retired, living on a fixed income that just enables them to get by. For more than 20 years, they have lived in a third-floor apartment. Last month Bud had a massive heart attack, and faces a long recovery ahead. His doctor would release Bud from the hospital, but won't permit him to climb the stairs to their apartment. Mary has found another apartment, but the couple has no cash for the security deposit.

■ Sandra is 18, pregnant, and living in a hotel without any family support. Because she has no savings, she has asked for help in obtaining a crib and other baby items, and also needs a security deposit to arrange more suitable housing.

■ Mr. Ginski lost his job because of alcoholism. He alienated himself from family and friends, and eventually ended up homeless. At his request, shelter staff referred him to an alcoholism program, and he is now on a waiting list for treatment. Meanwhile he needs bus tokens to get to a daily meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous.

A Calendar of Prayers

Sunday, December 6

Pray for the success of the Christmas Appeal. So many people in need are waiting for assistance.

Monday, December 7

Pray for people who are employed and those who are unemployed who wait for just wages and steady work.

Tuesday, December 8

Today is the feast of the Immaculate Conception. Pray for all expectant parents who await their children's births.

Wednesday, December 9

Pray for all who are fleeing their homelands and waiting for refuge on foreign shores.

Thursday, December 11

Pray for hope and peace as you wait at stop lights, in cashier lines, in waiting rooms.

Saturday, December 12

Today is the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, who appeared to Juan Diego as a poor and pregnant native woman. Pray for our brothers and sisters in the Americas who celebrate this day as a remembrance of hope.

"During advent we pray with hope, we live with hope. Hope is the gift from God that empowers us to take steps to bring about the kingdom of God in our world. It is expressed in the simple gift of bringing a meal to a sick or frail elderly person, offering encouragement to someone seeking employment, cutting back of what we have to give to people in need, making peace with those around us. Through our giving, others receive hope, and we bring about the kingdom of God."

— Laura Stanko Britto

Jesus comes back into the world when we offer him a dwelling-place in our hearts,

when we accept him in his law of love, when we do what Mary did and conceive Jesus and carry him in us, so that he is able to become the heart of our life.

Then his love and goodness and his sympathy for all men and women will shine out into the world

like a light through us. Then he will smile through our eyes and help with our hands and once again live his redeeming life of the Gospel.

Then we shall be the doors, the tens and hundreds of thousands of doors, through which he, the Lord, the Prince of Peace, God-with-us, will enter his world, his kingdom.

— Werenfried van Straaten

What is the Christmas Appeal?

It is a cooperative effort of the *Catholic Courier* and diocesan Social Ministry to raise funds that will help people in desperate financial crises.

For 22 years, the appeal has enabled the Catholic community to help thousands of people in 12 counties to meet life's basic needs. Christmas Appeal funds have been there for them when no other sources of aid were available.

Who benefits from the appeal?

Funding from the Christmas Appeal helps individuals and families in short-term crises. These are people who have no financial resources and are either awaiting or ineligible for assistance

through other sources.

They represent all ages, religions and races, and include the physically and developmentally disabled.

How does it work?

The appeal consists of a series of articles in the *Catholic Courier* and a direct-mail solicitation of prior donors.

Appeal proceeds are allocated to the emergency funds of the following diocesan agencies: Catholic Family Center, 22.33 percent; Finger Lakes Office of Social Ministry, 22.33 percent; Southern Tier Office of Social Ministry, 22.33 percent; Bishop Sheen Ecumenical Housing Foundation, 22.33 percent; and diocesan Urban Services, 11 percent.

CATHOLIC COURIER SOCIAL MINISTRY **Christmas APPEAL**

I want to help. Please use my donation to help a neighbor in need. Mail check (payable to "Christmas Appeal") and this coupon to:

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 c/o Social Ministry of the Diocese of Rochester
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