

CATHOLIC COURIER SOCIAL MINISTRY
**Christmas
 APPEAL**

Advent calls us to service, pursuit of justice

By Judy Taylor
 Guest contributor

Week Two

Sunday, Dec. 5 — Through ongoing conversion, we become more open to the fullness of God's love for us and for all humankind. Christ brings salvation for all and reaffirms the dignity of each person.

Many people in need turn to Catholic social-service agencies because they are assured of assistance that is compassionate and respectful of their dignity.

Marion, a proud grandmother, is trying to raise two pre-teen grandsons. She has always managed to stretch her limited income to meet their needs. Then circumstances forced her to move to a different apartment. When her finances were exhausted by the security deposit and the moving expenses, St. Andrew's Area Food Cupboard was able to help her through the month. A Christmas Appeal grant helps the cupboard serve more than 375 families a month.

Monday, Dec. 6 — This is St. Nicholas's Day. He was an early bishop of the city of Myra, in what is now part of Turkey. He is one of the most beloved figures in history, especially among the Eastern churches.

Nicholas was known for his charity and advocacy for the poor. In response to a famine, he refused to eat until everyone had food; during a plague, he turned the chancery into a clinic. He is said to have saved three sisters from lives of prostitution with a secret gift of gold.

Christmas Appeal funds, likewise, often have made dramatic differences in the lives of individuals. Michael had dropped out of school at the age of 15 due to many problems in his home life. Thanks to \$25 in Christmas Appeal funds, he was able to apply for a General Equivalency Diploma. He earned the diploma and today attends Monroe Community College.

Like many families, Joyce, Frank and their children were barely making it from paycheck to paycheck. When Frank lost his job, they were devastated. Two of their six children have a medical condition requiring an expensive dietary supplement. When unemployment benefits ran out, they applied for social services but were not eligible because they owned a car. Through all of this, Christmas Appeal funds assisted the family with food vouchers and a rent payment that



saved them from eviction. Today the family is back on track and grateful for the help that carried them through a very difficult time.

Tuesday, Dec. 7 — Today is the feast of St. Ambrose, who strongly warned his flock 1,600 years ago against excessive spending: "The large rooms of which you are so proud are in fact your shame. They are big enough to hold crowds — and also big enough to shut out the voice of the poor... There is your sister or brother, naked and crying! And you stand there confused over the choice of an attractive floor covering."

Over the years, the three Trenton children got in the habit of huddling together in one bed at night as protection against the rages of their alcoholic father. When he abandoned the family, social services informed the mother that she would have to provide two bedrooms for the children. Southern Tier Social Ministry used Christmas Appeal funds to help her purchase mattresses. Mrs. Trenton now attends a women's support group and has entered school at BOCES. The husband is still in and out of their lives, but with support she is able to protect the children. The cycle of violence has at least been interrupted.

Holy Apostles parish receives a Christmas Appeal grant that enables the parish to reach out to neighbors who sometimes remain anonymous. Such was the case on one very cold night when a couple's car tire went flat near the church. They sought only blankets. They were unemployed, homeless and living in their car.

Wednesday, Dec. 8 — Today's feast of the Immaculate Conception affirms that Mary was filled with grace from the moment of her conception in the womb of her mother. She was the first to be freed from sin and the first to be redeemed, and is a perfect image of what each member of the church is called to be — a servant of the Lord.

Many gaps and tears exist in social

services — the government safety net for the poor. Those who turn to our Catholic agencies are often the victims of the system that is supposed to help them.

A 50-year-old disabled woman was given custody of her three-year-old grandson. The child needs constant care due to mental and physical problems resulting from abuse at the hands of his mother. The grandmother's total monthly income is less than \$500. Rent and utilities use all but a few dollars. A rural county agency referred her to the Finger Lakes Office of Social Ministry because no government resources would pay such expenses as the monthly 150-mile trek to the court appointed specialist in Rochester. Christmas Appeal funds assisted her with gasoline for that trip and also with a month's supply of propane heating/cooking fuel.

Thursday, Dec. 9 — Blessed Juan Diego, a native Mexican Indian, is honored today as more than just the one who saw Our Lady of Guadalupe. Recognition of his own holiness led to his beatification.

Bill traveled to Rochester from Ohio hoping to secure a job after a long-term stretch of unemployment. En route, he was assaulted and robbed of all his money and identification. Stranded, Bill had no option but to seek public assistance. But without his identification, he couldn't even apply. Thanks to \$15 from the Christmas Appeal, he was able to send for a copy of his birth certificate. He now has a permanent job and says he will donate to the fund himself to help someone the way he was helped.

Friday, Dec. 10 — Among the prolific spiritual writings of the Trappist monk Thomas Merton, who died on this day in 1968, we have this reflection: "In Advent we celebrate the coming and indeed the presence of Christ in our world. We witness to his presence even in the midst of all its inscrutable problems and tragedies. Our Advent faith is not an

escape from the world... Our task is to seek and find Christ in our world as it is, and not as it might be."

The faces of the Alonso family are quite familiar to those who minister at Corpus Christi Parish's Dimitri House. The family's faith and hope and trust in God's love are unshaken amid their numerous health and economic troubles. Mr. Alonso's limited education makes it difficult for him to fill out all the paperwork required for social services. The family's benefits have been cut off periodically because some form or other had not been filled out or submitted properly. The Alonsos are grateful for the emergency supply of food they receive when needed, and for assistance on working with the social-service bureaucracy. Those who minister to them have also expressed gratitude for the experience of knowing this Christ-centered family.

Saturday, Dec. 11 — Advent teaches us to wait with joyful hope for God, confident his reign will win out; that the poor and the lowly will be raised up; that peace will break out; and justice will be done. But Advent also teaches us that God waits for us to free the imprisoned; feed the hungry; shelter the homeless; make peace; and do the work of justice.

A family with three young children began to fall apart after the father was diagnosed with AIDS. Due to his condition, he had to cut back his hours at work. Disability benefits, if any, would not start for some time. The mother was employed, but under great stress trying to cope with her husband's illness. The couple separated. Economic complications soon set in. During the separation, the family was eligible for some public assistance. Eventually the father was laid off from his job and became eligible for Social Security. As a result, however, his family then became ineligible for assistance. The family fell behind in rent payments and faced eviction. They exhausted all financial resources and could not meet even basic expenses. Funds from another agency provided food, but the Southern Tier Office of Social Ministry was asked to provide rent assistance. The Christmas Appeal fund is one of the few that can be used for this purpose, because many other community agencies are restricted to food and clothing assistance.

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 Taylor is education and advocacy communications manager in diocesan Social Ministry.

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 23 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 it?

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

awaiting or ineligible for assistance through other sources.

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, 26.33 percent; Finger Lakes Office of Social Ministry, 26.33 percent; Southern Tier Office of Social Ministry, 26.33 percent; Bishop Sheen Ecumenical Housing Foundation, 10 percent; and diocesan Urban Services, 11 percent.

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I want to help. Please use my donation to help a neighbor in need.

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

Mail check (payable to "Christmas Appeal") and this coupon to:

Christmas Appeal
 c/o Social Ministry of the Diocese of Rochester
 1150 Buffalo Road
 Rochester, New York 14624