

Christmas Appeal

Funds help families feel 'Christian blessing'

By Lee Strong
Associate editor

Sister Mary Dismas Foster, RSM, is no longer working at Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Parish, having moved on to ministry at the Sisters of Mercy Motherhouse in October.

But the nun, known as Sister Dismas, has not forgotten the people who came to the Rochester parish for help.

There was the mother and her four children who moved to Rochester from Puerto Rico last year, and were living in an apartment without furniture. Back in Puerto Rico, her husband had left her, and the family had been forced to move from relative to relative, many of whom were hostile.

"I came over (to Rochester) so that I could live in peace with my children," the woman had explained to Sister Dismas.

Then there was the grandmother who had five teens living at home, had legal custody of her daughter's four children — because the daughter was incarcerated — and then one of her sons brought his child home to live with them, and her own brother, who just got out of jail, moved in.

And then there was a woman who moved to Rochester with her two young children from the Dominican Republic and who was attending Monroe Community College. The family was unprepared for the realities of a Rochester winter.

"There's a lot of sad families around," Sister Dismas said.

Sister Dismas helped a lot of those families with food, clothing and furniture that had been donated to the parish. But these donations could only go so far, she said.

"While we did get donations ... (they)



still would not cover the number of people who still had to get baskets," she said.

To help fill these families' needs for food and gifts, Sister Dismas relied on funds from the *Catholic Courier*/Catholic Charities Christmas Appeal.

The Christmas Appeal began in 1969 as a combined effort of diocesan Catholic Charities and the *Catholic Courier*. The intention of the appeal was to provide a pool of money that could help people in emergency situations who can't find help elsewhere, or who can't wait for that help to begin. Over the years, workers at Catholic Charities, the Bishop Sheen Ecumenical Housing Foundation and diocesan Urban Services have used appeal funds to help such people bridge the gap.

The appeal funds sent to Our Lady of Mt. Carmel came through Urban Services. Jacquelyn Dobson, who in addition to her duties as director of the diocesan Office of Black Ministries oversaw the committee that evaluated Christmas Appeal funding requests for Urban Services, said that the funds help a number of parishes and ministries throughout the

city of Rochester.

"The majority (of the funds are used) for Christmas baskets and Christmas vouchers," Dobson reported.

The funds have also been used in the past for such things as boots (through St. Joseph's House of Hospitality), bus tokens so that people can get to work (St. Michael's Parish) and winter clothing (Holy Rosary Parish).

At St. Boniface Parish, however, the focus is on food.

Cynthia Smith runs the parish social ministry committee's Christmas basket program, which makes use of Appeal funds.

Each basket contains the basics for a Christmas dinner, then some food staples such as peanut butter, jelly and canned goods that can help to feed the families beyond Christmas Day, Smith explained.

She noted that the program is 15 years old, so word of mouth has gone out about it. The names of families needing help are referred through a variety of sources, including parishioners and St. Boniface School. The families are screened to make sure there is no duplication, Smith added.

This year, the need for the aid is growing, Smith said.

Last year, she noted, 56 families received baskets. This year, 58 families have already been approved, and more requests are coming in.

"I've had people call Dec. 24, desperate," Smith said.

But the committee will try to meet as many of the requests as possible — with the help of Christmas Appeal funds — Smith acknowledged.

"What we're trying to do really is to try to bring some Christian blessing into a family," Smith declared.

Neediest Cases



Monies collected during the *Catholic Courier*/Catholic Charities Christmas Appeal aid people throughout the year, but especially at Christmas. The following are some of the kinds of individuals and families who have been helped in the past with Christmas Appeal funds.

* A single mother with children ages 7, 8 and 9 was working but only earning minimum wage. Her car needed major repairs, but she did not have enough to pay for them. Loss of her car could have meant loss of her job. Catholic Charities of Livingston County supplied \$250 in Christmas Appeal funds that, combined with funds from other agencies, paid for the repairs and allowed her to continue working.

* An 81-year-old woman was having

ongoing problems with her home's septic system. Bishop Sheen Ecumenical Housing Foundation workers who visited the home also discovered that the woman was being abused by her daughter, son-in-law and grandchildren, all of whom lived with her. Adult Protective Services were contacted, and the woman's daughter and family was asked to move. Meanwhile, Christmas Appeal funds were used to help replace the septic system.

* An 80-year-old woman had to carry water into her home from a well. Christmas Appeal funds were used to help buy a hot water heater and a water pump to bring water into the home.

* An 82-year-old woman living in a mobile home was having problems with her toilet. She took it apart herself to try to fix it, but could not. She did not have enough money to hire a plumber to come in and finish the job. Christmas Appeal funds were used to hire a plumber to help her.

* A 26-year-old woman with develop-

mental disabilities bought a home two years ago, but was unable to pay for repairs when her roof later began to leak. With the help of Christmas Appeal funds, she was able to have a new roof installed.

* A 14-year-old boy was in a serious car accident that left him unconscious for two weeks and in the hospital for an extended period. His single mother needed help to pay for enough gas to get her back and forth from the hospital to her home to be with her other two children, ages 13 and 16. She was given \$50 in Christmas Appeal funds for gas.

* A couple faced large medical bills due to the wife's terminal illness. The husband worked full-time, but was unable to keep up with them. Catholic Charities of the Livingston County provided \$45 in Christmas Appeal funds to pay for three months of the Emergency Alert Response Service Lifeline to help her stay in her home as long as possible.

* An elderly widow depending on SSI

What is the Christmas Appeal?

It is a cooperative effort of the *Catholic Courier* and diocesan Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Rochester to raise funds for people in desperate financial crisis.

For the past 29 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?

The Christmas Appeal helps individuals and families in short-term financial crisis. These are people who have no financial resources and are either awaiting or are ineligible for assistance through other sources.

How does it work?

Appeal proceeds are allocated to emergency funds of the following diocesan agencies: Catholic Family Center; Catholic Charities of the Finger Lakes; Catholic Charities of the Southern Tier; Catholic Charities of Livingston County outreach; Bishop Sheen Ecumenical Housing Foundation; and diocesan Urban Services.

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and a small pension left by her husband has had a hard time keeping up with bills for repairs to her aging home. Her furnace broke down and needed to be replaced. Thanks to Christmas Appeal funds and a contractor who donated some materials and his services, she has heat this winter.

* A mother with two small children ages 3 and 5 lost her part-time job, and her husband deserted the family. He also emptied their bank account and took their car. Before he left, he had failed to pay the rent and utilities for several months, but had not told her. She received some Christmas Appeal funds to pay enough rent to avoid eviction and enough to the utility company to avoid shut-off while waiting for public assistance to begin.



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