



Reuters/CNS

A Vietnamese Catholic woman lights a candle to the Virgin Mary at a Catholic religious shrine in Ho Chi Minh City. U.S. President Bill Clinton raised the issue of human rights, including religious freedom, during his Nov. 16-19 visit.

Report monitors abuse

By Patricia Zapor
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — The independent U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, in a Dec. 8 report, sternly criticized the Clinton administration's response to religious freedom abuses abroad as inconsistent and hesitant.

The commission praised some areas of progress in linking foreign policy to religious rights since the International Religious Freedom Act took effect two years ago.

It noted, for example, that U.S. embassy personnel abroad are working to raise the issue of religious freedom with their foreign counterparts and are investigating religious freedom issues.

But the commission, whose members in-

clude Archbishop Theodore E. McCarrick of Newark, N.J., also took issue with what it described as weaknesses in the U.S. government's actions.

"Unfortunately, the (State Department's annual) report shows that in several key countries — those in which significant religious freedom violations occur — U.S. policies and actions do not reflect the gravity of the situation," said the commission report.

In particular, it criticized the State Department for failing to publicize U.S. sanctions against what it has designated "countries of particular concern." Those countries include Burma, China, Iran, Iraq and Sudan and the Taliban regime of Afghanistan and the former Milosevic regime in Serbia.

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Helping hands at Christmas

Celebrating with family, back in his home town of Albany, is a Christmas tradition for Bishop Matthew H. Clark.

Yet earlier on Christmas Day, Bishop Clark observes a different Christmas ritual: going to jail.

The bishop regularly celebrates Christmas Day Mass at the Monroe County Jail in downtown Rochester. With one or two exceptions, he said, this has been an annual commitment since he became the Rochester Diocese's bishop in 1979.

Bishop Clark explained that the liturgy, held at mid-morning, plugs into his schedule because he celebrates midnight Mass at Sacred Heart Cathedral and has the morning free.

"It just fell into place as being natural and appropriate," Bishop Clark said of this tradition. "It's partly because on Christmas Day, it's hard to imagine a group more alone, if you will, feeling the gravity of being alone, than prisoners. They have so little and miss their families desperately."

The same might also be said for those who reside at nursing facilities or turn to soup kitchens for holiday meals. Volunteers are needed on holidays to help meet the needs of these populations, even though holidays are generally considered "days off" for prospective volunteers.

The Elmira Community Kitchen served 200 free dinners on Thanksgiving Day, for example, and is expected to serve the same number Christmas Day. This compares to a normal lunch crowd of 35 and a dinner gathering of 50 to 55.

"A lot of the people who come on holidays aren't our regular cus-



Frank Zembo, a volunteer at St. Anne's Home, helps Rita McDonald stay seated in her wheelchair during Mass in the chapel on Dec. 4. Zembo helps out at St. Anne's by wheeling residents to and from Mass.

tomers' and aren't in a position to fix a whole dinner," said Roy Forker, hospitality minister at the kitchen, a ministry of Catholic Charities of the Southern Tier.

Forker said 36 volunteer workers showed up on Thanksgiving Day, so he's not worried about a shortage of volunteers for the free dinner that will take place on Christmas afternoon. The holiday dinners come complete with entertainment and a decorated eating facility, said Forker, who noted that the dinners are made possible by the generosity of numerous donors.

At St. Peter's Kitchen in Rochester, Sister Barbara Kuhn, SSJ, director, relies on many volunteers to help serve approximately 160 free dinners on Thanksgiving and Christmas. Interestingly, she noted, these are mostly people who don't volunteer regularly: some are non-Catholic (a story on Page 14 highlights some), and others come in on holidays because their jobs generally make them unavailable on weekdays. The kitchen serves lunches Monday through Friday.

Sister Kuhn said that on Thanksgiving and Christmas the staff provides table service and makes a point of mingling with the clientele. For instance, Darryl Houser, Jurina Roberts and their two

young children attended the Thanksgiving dinner and plan to return on Christmas. Houser is out of work, and the family must get by on public assistance. Houser said he was surprised to be treated to a sit-down dinner on Thanksgiving: "The people here, if they can help, they will," he said. "And I think that's very decent. You don't find that

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Story by Mike Latona • Photo by Andrea Dixon