

# Campaign raises profile of the poor

Rob Cullivan/Catholic Courier

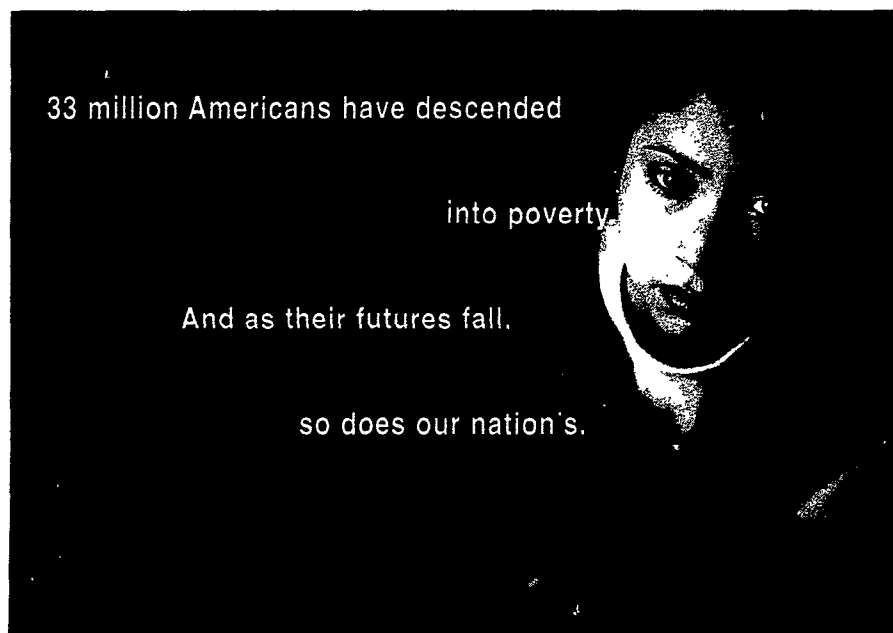
You may or may not care about poverty, but poverty affects you regardless of your attitude toward it, according to Father Robert J. Vitillo, executive director of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, the U.S. bishops anti-poverty program.

In a phone interview, the priest said poor people may be tempted to resort to crime, which eventually burdens all citizens who have to foot the bill to protect society from criminals.

"We pay more for the criminal-justice system than if we invest in good jobs, education, health care and living wages," he said.

Father Vitillo said CCHD is once again calling on citizens to ponder poverty's causes, effects and cures during Poverty in America Awareness Month this January. CCHD selected January to highlight poverty because it follows the holidays when many are generous toward the poor, and the program officials want people to think about why they had to give in the first place.

As executive director of CCHD, Father Vitillo oversees an office that has funded hundreds of community-based self-help and advocacy programs throughout the United States since CCHD began in 1969. The campaign's grant recipients include Interfaith Action, a federation of churches and organizations on Rochester's west side, as well as The Independent Farmworker Center, which advocates on behalf of migrant farm workers in New York state, including farm workers in the



33 million Americans have descended

into poverty.

And as their futures fall,

so does our nation's.

Photo courtesy of Catholic Campaign for Human Development

Brockport area.

CCHD's annual collection in the Diocese of Rochester last September netted almost \$104,000. Seventy-five percent of that collection will go to CCHD's nationally funded grants, while 25 percent of the collection funds local projects, according to Judy Taylor, spokeswoman for diocesan Catholic Charities.

The agency's regional offices distribute the funds to grant applicants each year. Taylor said that the local collection has funded such projects as a mentoring program that matches teams of volunteers with people in various challenging situations, including poverty, and a program that teaches migrant families to advocate for their children in the public schools, as well as get involved in

their education. Taylor said CCHD is one way for Catholics to help their neighbors change the conditions that keep them poor.

"CCHD is not a humiliating hand-out," Taylor said. "It's a life-affirming hand-up."

This month also marks the third and final year of CCHD's campaign to increase awareness of poverty in the United States. Information on the campaign can be found on the Internet at [povertyusa.org](http://povertyusa.org). The first year promoted "Poverty U.S.A.," a fictitious state home to millions of impoverished Americans. The second year, CCHD promoted awareness of poverty's effects on children.

This year, CCHD has launched its "Real Words" campaign, promoted via public service advertisements in newspapers and on radio and TV. "Real Words" quotes dozens of poor people around the country surveyed and interviewed last year by CCHD, Father Vitillo said. For example, "Real Words" quotes a mother of five in Missouri whose family lives on \$8,860 a year.

"Struggling to pay bills, constant disconnection notices, not having money to wash and purchase clothing to work in because bills and household needs have to come first," she said. "Listening to your children say they are hungry, but not knowing what you are going to be able to give them before your food stamps come."

A California man with a family of six that lives on less than \$12,000 a year said being poor made him feel "looked over by most (due to fear), forgotten, seeing the richest people in the world while hungry and cold, feels alone and invalid." And one woman from Kansas sums up pover-

ty with some dark humor: "Feeling like you always owe everyone either an apology or an explanation or both."

Part of the reason CCHD interviewed poor people was also to make those not poor understand that many poor people work hard and are not simply poor because of their own fault, Father Vitillo said. For example, he said, some people have two or three jobs but still are unable to make ends meet.

CCHD also published the results of a survey called "Poverty Pulse" that has examined American attitudes toward the poor and poverty's causes over the last three years. The survey showed 90 percent of Americans in 2001 were either "very" or "somewhat" concerned about poverty, versus 87 percent surveyed in 2000.

A lack of education was seen by 32 percent of those surveyed in 2001 as the main reason people are poor while "laziness," "lack of employment opportunities" and "lack of work/employment that pays living wage" were also seen as reasons for poverty by large numbers of respondents. However, the number of people surveyed blaming the poor for their own plight dropped from 32 percent in 2000 to 25 percent in 2001. "Unfair distribution of wealth" and "Lack of funds for higher education" were both seen by only 1 percent of respondents as a major cause of poverty, and were tied for the least likely cause of poverty in the eyes of those surveyed.

The survey also showed an increase from 38 percent in 2000 to 49 percent in 2001 of those who believed it was the government's responsibility to address poverty. At the same time, those who thought it was "everyone's" responsibility dropped from 52 percent in 2000 to 48 percent in 2001. Meanwhile, the survey showed a decrease in the percentage of people, from 44 percent to 41 percent, who gave money to organizations helping the poor from 2000 to 2001 — but an increase from 12 percent to 32 percent of people who donated food, clothing or goods to the poor.

Father Vitillo said that empowering the poor to change their lives is what ends poverty. CCHD's approach is rooted in Catholic social teaching, which calls on all to help one another in "solidarity," he said.

"We want poor and non-poor people to build solidarity to see that they have a stake in each other's future and to work together to (overcome) the obstacles that keep them from breaking the cycle of poverty," he said.

## Sr. Joseph André DeMers, SSJ

Sister Joseph André DeMers, SSJ, died Dec. 11, 2002, at the age of 93.

Born in Hudson Falls, N.Y., she entered the Sisters of St. Joseph in 1930 from St. Monica Parish, Rochester. She earned her bachelor's degree from Nazareth College and a master's degree from Cardinal Stritch College in Chicago.

Sister DeMers taught in diocesan schools in Rochester, Geneva and Spencerport for 49 years. She was principal at Sacred Heart Cathedral School and School of the Holy Childhood in Rochester and St. John the Evangelist in Spencerport. She was also coordinator of the Learning Center at St. Augustine in Rochester and St. Theodore in Gates.

Sister DeMers joined the staff at the Religious Life Resource Center



at the motherhouse in 1982. She retired in 1995 and moved to the convent infirmary in 2001 due to failing health.

Sister DeMers is survived by her brother, Daniel (Bud); nieces and nephews; and her sisters in the congregation of St. Joseph.

Her funeral liturgy was celebrated in the motherhouse chapel Dec. 16 by Father John Mulligan, assisted by Father Bruce Ammering. Burial was at Holy Sepulchre Cemetery. Memorial contributions may be made to St. Joseph Convent Infirmary, 4095 East Ave., Rochester, NY 14618.

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