

HOMELESS

In the Shelter of Our Hearts

by S. Mary Margaret McKenzie

Homelessness happens: tenants have to move because a landlord can't meet the mortgage payment; a single parent needs more space for growing children; a family of nine cannot stay indefinitely with already crowded relatives, but what the law requires for housing seven children is not affordable; a person in recovery from chemical abuse slips, loses his job and, therefore, his apartment; a young woman volunteering her time and talent for the enrichment of children no longer has a place when the outreach is cut back; a young mother involved in some "activity" has to move before she is evicted or reported; another mother away from her abusive husband with two small children knows the quickest eviction of all from a catastrophic fire. These are our neighbors, our friends, and their options are few.

The man in recovery sleeps on a shelter floor for the first time. The large family is dreading the shelter, but if they go, they will get emergency help from subsidized housing which has a two year waiting list. Without newspaper, phone or car the long search for "a place to stay" begins. We have never heard the homeless talk about a place to "live."

It did not occur to me as a child, even though I grew up during the Depression, that homelessness could happen. Children in North Minneapolis know that it does. The young boy whose name means "heart of the valley" came home from school one day

to find that he was moving that afternoon. His mother told him to come with his little sister to say goodbye to us. They appeared at the door during Evening Prayer in too much shock and pain to talk, just looking at us out of a numbness that was holding on to everything. They left with many embraces and a care package. Each time they turned to wave, another one of us began to cry.

Archbishop Roach warned us that it would be "hard, very difficult, terrible, awful" to stand with such pain and be helpless. We were not expecting it to come in the homelessness that seems to have plagued the neighborhood this winter. We have often recalled the counsel of Bishop Carlson that until we could enter into our own suffering, we would not be able to support others in theirs.

"Windsock time" with the children has prepared us for "phone time" with some who use our phone to make real estate appointments. While they wait for calls to be returned, we pray with them or they join us for one of the Hours of the Office. One woman brought her sister-in-law along just for the prayer. Prayer does bond us in our mutual suffering, and once prayer brought a friend willing to make his properties affordable to any reliable tenants we could recommend. Also, there is that amazing grace that flows in and through and around us when the homeless stand by us, too, in our helplessness in helping them and we learn that the "heart of the valley" is not the terrain of hopelessness. □

We thank you, dear Friends of Fremont, for your very generous response to our annual appeal. We received approximately 500 replies (a 35% response) to our development letter. Your support assures us of financial stability as we live and pray among the people of North Minneapolis.

May God bless you!

Making Connections: An Update

Our "windsock time" (3:30-4:30 four times a week) has evolved: Visitation students from Mendota Heights do their service work here helping us give the children the love and care they come for. Through our connection with the young women who help and other interested people, the **children have had opportunities to dance at major events, tour the city to see the Christmas lights, attend the production of *Black Nativity*, go ice skating and sliding.** At Christmas time we thought we would give our young friends a **gift that we ourselves made.** Our neighbor, George, cut little **wooden stars** which we painted, decorated, made into pins and presented to them in a prayer service.

Through these children we have come to know their families. It has been our joy to be able to **connect families who WANT to help with those who NEED help.** These families, who would otherwise never have even met, have forged **friendships.** We have been able to direct the good will and energy of students and benefactors to agencies in our area as well.

We have had a **taste of the news-making weather** in several parts of the U.S. as we **visited the Visitation Monasteries of the Second Federation.** These visits provided us with the opportunity to share our self evaluation and to dialogue about the Visitation charism and the future.

In keeping with part of our original intent in coming here, we **hosted and conducted a retreat day** for 13 men and women of the Catholic Charities Volunteer Corps. Their supervisors came in the afternoon and made dinner for them. Those events always turn out to be a blessing to us.

Sr. Karen participates in the diocesan **vocation ministry** by helping with a group of women who meet monthly about their desire to pursue religious life. She and Sr. Mary Frances wrote the major articles of the vocation insert in the diocesan paper. □