

MANNA *in the wilderness*

September 2000

The Newsletter of the Las Vegas Catholic Worker

Volume 15, Number 1

The Profound Crossing of Paths

Sonja Brouwers has been a Las Vegas Catholic Worker volunteer for four years. Below she reflects on her involvement with our monthly food basket program.

by Sonja Brouwers

My partner Lori Bossy and I drive up in front of a small, run-down home on Washington Avenue. It is our first visit here. Julia Occhiogrosso has informed us that the Garcia Family (not their real name) to whom we have been assigned live here. In addition to the father and mother, there are four children ages 4 months to 13 years, a grandfather, and an elderly uncle living here. This is all the information we have to start.

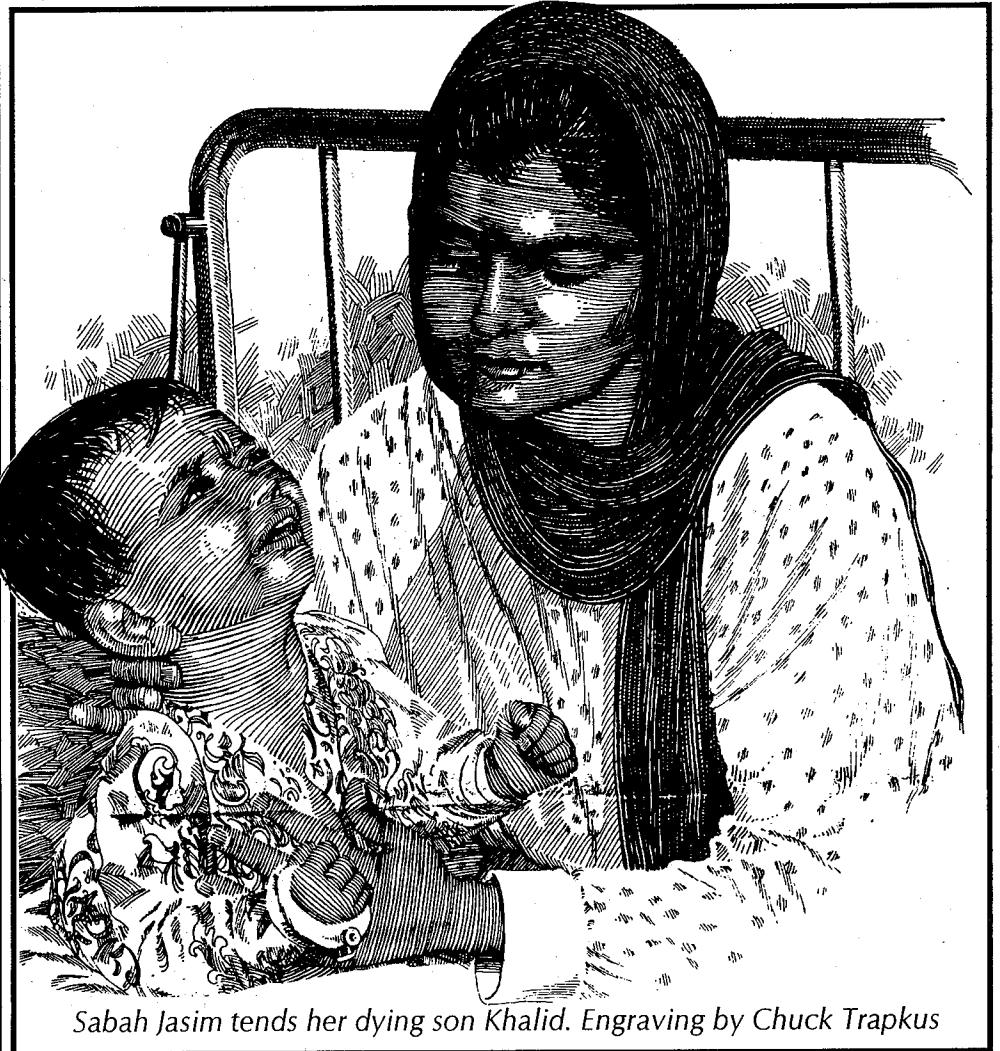
We walk to the front door, which is covered by a wrought-iron gate, and knock. The family should be expecting us. As we wait, I notice that the front window has been broken and covered with cardboard and duct tape. I turn and make a visual sweep of the rest of the house and the shabby neighborhood overall, and I think "This is America. This is my hometown. This is appalling." I have seen this level of poverty before only in third world countries, Mexico and Jamaica. I feel ashamed at being confronted with it in my own country, where the disparity between the wealthy and the poor is so great.

The door is finally opened by a little boy, 3 year old Bobby, with his grandfather close behind. The grandfather does not speak English, but fortunately Lori speaks a little Spanish and is able to introduce us and explain the purpose of our visit. Apparently, the mother and father have not told him we would be coming today and they are not in; they have taken their baby daughter, who was born with a heart defect, to see the doctor. We are invited inside, and meet John, 13, and Susan, 11. Happily for me, the children speak English, and I am able to converse with them. John is never still during our visit; he constantly sweeps and tidies up the place, obviously embarrassed about his home being seen by visitors. He is quiet, but polite and curious of us. His sister, on

the other hand, is rather gregarious and prattles on nonstop. They both help me carry in what we've brought for them, but are more interested in us than in the food boxes. I am amazed by Lori, who is managing beautifully, speaking easily with the grandfather and be-

friending the children. I am ashamed at myself for feeling so ill at ease. I feel awkward and intrusive, afraid they will think I am judging them, and annoyed with myself for not ever having learned to speak Spanish.

(continued on other side)



Sabah Jasim tends her dying son Khalid. Engraving by Chuck Trapkus

End Sanctions Against Iraq

In 1997, Daniel F. Walsh, Bishop of Las Vegas, joined 54 other U.S. Roman Catholic Bishops in courageously opposing sanctions against Iraq, moving them into direct confrontation with U.S. foreign policy. Led by Bishop Thomas Gumbleton of Detroit, the plea fell five votes short of the two-thirds majority needed at the conference of U.S. Catholic Bishops. "The hidden nature of the war being waged against Iraq is tragic. Editorials seldom appear, and we see no front-page stories, even though these sanctions have caused the deaths of more than one million people, constituting one of the greatest human rights abuses of our time," stated Bishop Gumbleton. Now, three years later, the UN Food

and Agriculture Organization reported that the sanctions are directly responsible for the deaths of 1.2 - 1.5 million people, at least 500,000 of them children under five years of age.

President Clinton said the following this year in India:

"I think the targeting of innocent civilians is the worst thing about modern conflicts today. And the extent to which more and more people tend to believe it is legitimate to target innocent civilians to reach their larger political goals, I think that is something that has to be resisted at every turn."

-Bill Clinton, March 21, 2000

Please contact your representatives and write your local newspapers to end the sanctions against Iraq.

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one of the bedrooms. Like the grandfather, he is elderly and neatly dressed in a long sleeved shirt and bolero tie. He walks with the aid of a walker. Uncle smiles at us, but doesn't say anything; he does not speak English. Susan explains that the uncle broke his hip not too long ago when, while working as a day laborer doing gardening he was approached by two young thugs who beat him because he did not have any cigarettes to give them. She is proud to report that the doctor said a man who did not have as strong a body as her uncle would have died from the beating.

John and Susan invite us to go into the back yard to see their puppies. Little Bobby follows us, but the grandfather and uncle remain indoors. Outside, there is a large dirt yard, with two broken-down vehicles and an empty cement pool. The Garcias have four large dogs of mixed breed, one of which recently had eight puppies. The puppies are lying on an old blanket placed under a sheet of plywood which has been propped at an angle on the back fence to make a shade. Susan hands me a puppy to hold. John points to four thin trees, randomly planted in the back yard. He waters them from a hose, and says that his father planted one tree for each of the children. "This one is mine," says John of the largest.

"Do you want to see my room?" Bobby asks us. "No," intercepts John. "Your room is too messy." He looks at us and adds, "You can see mine, though. It's clean." We all go back inside and John takes us to his room. Surprisingly, it is filled with religious objects and candles. "I pray to Jesus every night," he says simply.

Before leaving, Lori asks the grandfather if there is anything special the family needs or wants that we can bring

on our next visit. He answers, but Lori is unable to understand what he means. "Corn flakes," Susan interprets for us. "He'd really like to have some corn flakes."

We return to the house a month later. This time, Lori and I find only the father and grandfather at home. The younger Mr. Garcia tells us his family is staying at another house nearby while he paints this one. The living room furniture is draped and the room smells of fresh paint. He tells us that he is trying to get rid of the cockroaches, too, but it is nearly impossible. He is speaking to us in English. Lori tells him that her boyfriend works in a glass shop and that she can send him over to repair the broken windows. Mr. Garcia refuses. Lori explains that her offer is for free. "No," he responds firmly. "I will fix them myself." Clearly the subject is closed.

We then leave the food boxes on the kitchen table and make a hasty retreat. "Oh Lori," I wail, as we climb into my truck. "We've insulted his pride. He accepts food for his family out of necessity, but he thinks we're criticizing how he keeps his home. We've overstepped our bounds." Then we, the two do-gooders, drive away. It's a fine line

we must walk. We can only help to the point it is accepted and no further. Assistance versus encroachment.

When we arrive the following month, we are met at the door by another man. He tells us the Garcia family has moved to El Paso so the father can find work.

Reflecting on my brief encounter with the Garcia family, I assess the impact of the crossing of our life paths. Did my monthly cornflake delivery change the course of their lives, moving them from poverty to prosperity? Absolutely not. However, the impact is profound within myself—my understanding of Christian charity and my struggle to love and accept the presence of God in all.

"As often as you do this for the least of my people you do it for me."



Thank you
for your
support &
generosity!

(FOR
TAB)

Our friend Toni Flynn has started the High Desert Catholic Worker in Valyermo, California (near Palmdale). For info please contact her: (661) 944-2655, P. O. Box 62, Valyermo, CA 93563.

"Our job is to love others without stopping to inquire whether or not they are worthy."

-Thomas Merton

PLEASE JOIN US:

Wednesday-Saturday, 6:00 a.m.:
Morning prayer at Catholic Worker.

Wednesday-Saturday, 6:30 a.m.:
Breakfast meal served at St. James Church parking lot (G & McWilliams St.) to the poor and homeless.

Tuesday, 5:30 p.m.:
Mass or Liturgy, potluck following. Call for location.

Seven Days a Week:
Hospitality (IHN) to 3 to 5 homeless families, call 638-8806 to volunteer.

Last Saturday each month; 8:30 a.m.:
Deliver food to homes in need, gather for reflection & prayer, call for info.

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Las Vegas Catholic Worker
(702) 647-0728
500 W. Van Buren Avenue
Las Vegas, NV 89106-3039

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