



Xmas
'85

Greetings from the Valley of the Sun, which is justifying its nickname today. It's been a busy day. "Our people", the residents of the city's outdoor shelter, were all evicted at 6:00 this morning, so the city could bulldoze their makeshift lean-tos. We brought coffee and donuts to a nearby park and had breakfast with them. But now it is afternoon, and after resisting for several weeks, I have finally succumbed and am listening to Christmas carols. Leontyne Price's recording of "Sweet Lil Jesus" is melting my heart and misting my eyes. It is time to wish you a blessed Christmas from this hopelessly sentimental romantic who is, in Paul Simon's immortal words, "still crazy after all these years."

I can't begin to tell you all that has happened since we last celebrated Christ's birthday. The enclosed article from The Gazette will supply some of that news. The statistics are staggering: 2,190 overnight lodgings for guests at Andre House; 2,438 meals served here; and at the outdoor shelter alongside the railroad yards, 40,858 evening meals served!

None of this could have happened, of course, without the help of so many generous and caring people. So many of you have been partners in our ministry by your financial support, by your volunteer energies, and, perhaps most significantly, by your prayerful encouragement.

There have been moments when I felt jeopardy, threatened by the darkness about to overwhelm. So much pain and hurt, so much isolation and estrangement! There have been times when I was blind with outrage at the system which allows, at times even forces, such things to happen to people. But then, like the annual miracle of Christmas, there would be a burst of penetrating light to scatter the darkness. One night during the soup line, when more than 500 people had already been fed, we reached that awful moment when the ladle scrapes the bottom to salvage a final bowl. There was a thin, gaunt young man in front of us, who smiled with relief when he realized he would get something to eat. When we announced there was no more, the next one in line, an aged, palsied man, began whimpering in confusion and distress. The younger man turned, saw the old man's pain and gently placed his bowl in those shaking, grateful hands. And once more, for a brief, shining moment, I saw, through tearful eyes, light scatter the darkness. Once again God's love had taken human flesh and blood, and words like tenderness and mercy had new meaning. For a splendid, sacramental moment, God was no longer "out there someplace", but right here and now: EMMANUEL! (Wonderful incarnations need not wait for countdowns of shopping days.)

May you be touched by the finger of God this holy season.
May you be bathed in that light which the darkness has never managed to overcome.
May you, too, in your laughter and your tears, stay "crazy after all these years."

Religion

The Phoenix Gazette

Saturday, November 23, 1985

Two priests make a home for selves, down-and-outers

By Clay Thompson
The Phoenix Gazette

This is a season of hospitality and sharing, a time of year when many of us are moved to acts of perhaps uncharacteristic charity.

For the Revs. John Fitzgerald and Michael Baxter, hospitality is not determined by the calendar. It is a way of life.

Fitzgerald and Baxter, a pair of Catholic priests who tend to finish each other's sentences, this month mark the first anniversary of Andre House, their home at 1002 W. Polk St.

And Andre House is just that — their home. It is not a facility or an agency or an institution. It is a home where the coffee pot is always on and, as long as there is room, the door is always open.

On any given day, seven to 12 otherwise homeless men are at home in the red brick house. They are transients, down-and-outers, job-seekers, any man looking for a place to live.

They spend their days working or looking for work or, Baxter said, "frankly, just wandering around." At night they come home.

Modeled after the late Dorothy Day's Catholic Workers' houses, Andre House is a home where, Baxter said, men "have a chance to get on their feet without paying bills. They have a better chance of getting a job with an address and a phone number."

Aside from a few rules — no drugs, no alcohol, no violence, no stealing — there are no strings attached. Guests stay for a few days or a few weeks or a few months.

It is hospitality at its simplest and, perhaps, at its best.

"I just see this as the Gospel in action for me," Baxter, 30, said.

"Hospitality," he said, "is taking people into your home and saying, 'Our house is your house. Our table is your table.' We don't go home at night. This is our home."

"We are trying to make a community where people are welcome from the start. It gives them a sense of stability and love and caring that an agency wouldn't be able to provide."

For Fitzgerald and Baxter, both products of Notre Dame University, Andre House is the result of a shared dream.

"I was very much influenced by the '60s," Fitzgerald, 42, said. "Pope John XXIII and Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy were all heroes of mine."

"I promised myself when I was ordained in 1969 that I wasn't going to spend the rest of my time working with people who were as prosperous as I was."

Fourteen years later, when he turned 40, he found himself doing just that. After teaching at a Catholic high school in an affluent north Chicago neighborhood and



Nancy Engebretson, *The Phoenix Gazette*

The Revs. John Fitzgerald (left) and Michael Baxter mark their first anniversary this month at Andre House in downtown Phoenix.

working in campus ministry at Notre Dame, where he met Baxter, Fitzgerald decided to hold himself to his pledge.

"When I turned 40, it seemed

like a good milestone to follow through on my promise," he said. He took a sabbatical and spent six months studying and six months

See • Home, B-7



Nancy Engebretson, *The Phoenix Gazette*

Bourgade and Maryvale high school volunteers help fix a meal for the Andre House soup line.

● Home

From B-5

traveling the country by bus, meeting church people doing what he wanted to do.

Baxter, meanwhile, was teaching at Bourgade High School in Phoenix after serving his noviate dishing up soup and draft counseling in Colorado Springs.

When they met again at Notre Dame last July, Fitzgerald said, "We put our heads together and decided to do something in the style of Dorothy Day and the Catholic Workers. Mike, of course, having been here for a year, was acutely aware of the needs of the homeless in Phoenix."

So late last year they rented the Polk Street house, fixed it up, planted a garden and plugged in the coffee pot. Their first guest walked in Nov. 29, and they have been walking in ever since.

Hospitality goes beyond the walls of Andre House (named for Brother Andre, the beatified doorkeeper of Notre Dame College, Montreal, legendary for his hospitality.)

"We knew we didn't want to confine our activity to the handful of people we could help in the house," Fitzgerald said. "On Christmas night, with some volunteers, we took a big pot of turkey soup to the outdoor shelter (for the homeless) at 13th Avenue and Madison Street.

"We did it again on New Year's Day and from then on on every Saturday."

Since then, the shelter soup line has grown into a nightly affair.

All this does not come easy or cheap. There are bills to pay, food to buy, work to be done. Baxter estimated the first year of operation, including the purchase of a used van, has cost about \$50,000.

The money and the help come from individuals and private donations. High school students turn up at the door to help cook supper. A manicurist donates all her tips. A church group passes the hat. A check arrives in the mail. It is a shaky and uncertain way of getting by, and Fitzgerald and Baxter like it that way.

"We don't want any strings attached to any organization for two reasons," Baxter said. "One, it means more people contribute to this at a personal sacrifice, and two ... it creates a certain precariousness that is good.

"Insecurity in a financial way leads us to trust in God and to know that what we get are gifts from God through other people. It is real clear to us that people are keeping this place going through the goodness of their hearts. It's all

by word of mouth. It's because people want to do good."

"There is," Fitzgerald said, "a kind of prevalent stereotype or mind-set that Arizona or Phoenix is not only indifferent to the plight of the poor, but mean-spirited as well. What has been so wonderful to me is that we have met so many people who don't fit that mind-set."

The volunteers and others who help Andre House receive as well as give.

"A lot of people were frustrated" because they were concerned about the homeless but did not know how to help, Fitzgerald said. "We provide a focus for them, a simple way to become involved. They see the face of something they've only heard about before."

"Poverty is not a concept. It is a sad reality for all sorts of men and women and children who are dispossessed. Homelessness is not a concept. It is a reality."

If their guests arrive at Andre House expecting a sermon or even a clerical collar, they have knocked on the wrong door.

"We don't preach the Word here," Baxter said. "It's the human touch. By treating people with integrity and humanity, we hope and pray that the hand of God is in that."