



ISTOCK

Many of the poor frequent soup kitchens on Christmas. It provides an opportunity for Christians to volunteer not only in serving the meal but by offering hospitality and Christmas cheer to those in need.

# THE SPIRIT OF GIVING AT CHRISTMAS

Share the joy of the season by doing deeds of mercy.

by Felix Carroll and Dan Valenti

As Christmas approaches, think of how the Child in the manger, obedient to the Father, offered Himself for the sake of us all: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him might not perish but might have eternal life” (Jn 3:16).

Christ came to save us from our sins, so we could become the children of God and share eternity with Him in heaven.

Such a great gift should fill our hearts with gratitude and joy at Christmas. Our Savior’s example should motivate us to love without measure and to sacrifice ourselves for the sake of others.

We can do that this Christmas season by performing works of mercy for those in need. To St. Faustina, His secretary of mercy, our Lord spoke of such deeds: “I demand from you deeds of mercy which are to arise out of love for Me. You are to show mercy to your neighbors always and everywhere” (*Diary*, 742).

In that spirit, the Marian Fathers of the Immaculate Conception and Marian Helpers share the joy of the Christmas season by helping others in need.

## Bringing joy to the elderly and sick

***“We speak of Jesus and the meaning of Christmas,” Fr. Mark Baron, MIC, says, “and we also help serve a Christmas meal. Again, it’s a big deal, because they don’t have a lot.”***

Father Mark Baron, MIC, house superior and novice master at the Marian Scholasticate in Washington, D.C., says on Christmas Day, the Marians there visit the Jeanne Jugan Residence as well as the Missionaries of Charity Gift of Peace Convent.

The Jugan residence, named after St. Jeanne Jugan and run by the Little Sisters of

the Poor, provides a home for men and women 60 and older who do not have the financial means to live anywhere else. Each Christmas day, Fr. Mark and the Marian seminarians visit the residence to sing Christmas carols.

“We go there and have fun with the residents,” Fr. Mark says. “Some may have no

other visitors that day, and while singing sounds like so little, the residents enjoy it. We sing the old standards, and many join in. To bring a little joy into their world is a big deal."

At the Gift of Peace Convent, Marians visit and speak with the clients, who are there because they are homeless, have AIDS, or are terminally ill.

"We speak of Jesus and the meaning of Christmas," Fr. Mark says, "and we also help serve a Christmas meal. In doing this, we try to interact with the people. Again, it's a big deal, because they don't have a lot.

"The convent runs a soup kitchen, five days a week. They have Christmas Mass where the soup kitchen is," Fr. Mark says. "About three years ago, the sisters asked me if I would like to come and celebrate Mass with them. I did and stayed afterward. Now it's a tradition where I bring the novices with me. We help serve and be a presence of hope for the people who come."

### National Shrine and the tree that gives

Single mothers, many of them teens, are among those in greatest need at Christmas. Each year, those mothers and their children occupy a warm place in the minds and hearts of the Marians and Marian Helpers at the National Shrine of The Divine Mercy on Eden Hill in Stockbridge, Mass.

In the Shrine sanctuary, the Marians set up a Christmas "Giving Tree." Each ornament contains a mother's wish list, wrapped in a ribbon. Marians, pilgrims, and Shrine employees pick an ornament and fulfill the request.

The National Shrine's Giving Tree serves the residents of Redfield House in Pittsfield, the county seat, about 12 miles north of Eden Hill. Redfield House serves single-parent households and their children — usually young, teen parents — while the residents work to obtain the skills they need to live independently.

Often, the requests include things like blankets, diapers, gift cards, phone cards, gas cards, and the like, but as Redfield House

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Services executive director Judy Hanley says, "We've gotten some amazing things from the Giving Tree. One year, people got money to pay outstanding bills. When you're a mom, your children's priorities come first, and the money allows the moms to buy something special for themselves that

they might not normally be able to buy, such as a new winter coat or a new outfit for a job interview. And the women are generous to each other, so if one family gets an item they can't use or that's the wrong size, they make sure someone else gets it who can use it."

Hanley says money also helps buy items such as cleaning supplies or toiletries. She says it's a great help for the women, who usually don't have any cash left at the end of the month for such items.

"We set up the Giving Tree because it needs doing," says Carol Scott, pilgrimage coordinator for the National Shrine. "It's that simple. We are called as Christians to respond to people in need."

### Deeds of mercy in a parish

In Seward, Neb., Fr. Randall Langhorst of St. Vincent de Paul Church pastors an active parish that embraces Divine Mercy and actively pursues deeds of mercy, not only at Christmas but year round.

"While the works of mercy help meet the social needs of those we serve, they also meet our need to give of ourselves through responsible stewardship," says Fr. Rand. "God's



**A deed of mercy could include visiting someone in a hospital on Christmas. Share the joy of the season with the sick who may be lonely.**



COURTESY OF OPERATION CHRISTMAS CHILD

Peter Markavage, executive assistant for the Association of Marian Helpers, shares with others at Christmas through a program called Operation Christmas Child. "This year, we will be having a 'pack-a-box' party, where the church will get together and pack boxes for needy families in other countries," Peter says.

mercy is not to be guarded within but selflessly given as it is so freely given to us."

The parish's year-round deeds of mercy include providing food and clothing for the needy; supporting parents through "diaper drives" and collecting baby items; praying for pro-life causes; assisting with Habitat for Humanity; offering Masses for the Poor Souls; helping the St. Vincent de Paul Society and their mission; giving out Divine Mercy materials as well as other catechetical materials; and participating in various prayer chains.

At Christmastime, the parish ramps up its efforts to serve those in need. Parishioners collect gifts for children, nursing home residents, and the poor; provide money for Catholic Social Services or other needs; prepare and distribute food baskets; and write letters and send care packages to troops overseas.

"Our parishioners are encouraged through the works of mercy to unite with Christ in offering themselves in love and sacrifice for the good of all people and the Church," says Fr. Rand. "The graces and blessings of God given to them in response not only are helping to form them in holiness but are an effective outreach of His message of mercy and love to all people."

### Shoeboxes and children's smiles

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***As you prepare for Christmas, remember that Child in the manger. Remember why He came. Give thanks to God, and then "do unto others" with merciful acts done out of love for Jesus.***

Operation Christmas Child, administered by Samaritan's Purse, an international Christian relief and evangelical organization. Peter participates through his church, Berkshire Hills Baptist Church in Lee, Mass., about four miles east of Stockbridge.

"This year, we will be having a 'pack-a-box' party, where the church will get together and pack boxes for

needy families in other countries," Peter says. "It's a great way to help others and also to enjoy fellowship with other church members. We are excited by a new feature, where we can add a note of friendship in the gift box and possibly hear back from someone who receives the gift."

The filled shoeboxes are returned to Samaritan's Purse to be distributed to children throughout the world. Boxes are filled with age-appropriate items — some practical and some fun — in categories aged 2-4, 5-9, and 10-14.

Members of the church donate \$7 for each box given to Samaritan's Purse to cover the costs of wrapping and shipping.

"It's a great way to bring a smile to a child's face on Christmas," says Peter. "It also may touch a child's heart and maybe change a life for the better."

As you prepare for Christmas, remember that Child in the manger. Remember why He came. Give thanks to God, and then "do unto others" with merciful acts done out of love for Jesus.