

## St. Francis Peace Award Goes to Detroit Woman For Sheltering HIV-Infected Women and Children

Nov. 13, 2003 -- Ona Harris, SFO, of Detroit, MI has received the St. Francis Peace Award from the Secular Franciscan Order in the United States.

Presented at the Order's recent national meeting in Santa Barbara, CA, the Peace Award recognizes Harris' extensive work on behalf of homeless women with HIV/AIDS and their children. She established Simon House in 1989 with a grant from the Sisters of Mercy, and in 2000 expanded the shelter to a renovated apartment building.

"I have played the role of mother and father" for 256 women who have gone through the shelter, Harris told the gathering of some 80 Franciscan leaders from across the country. In the 14 years the shelter has been in operation, she related, she has seen only three parents of the homeless women. "So now I have lots of 'grandchildren'."

When women were referred to Simon House, they were fed and sheltered until they could find a permanent place to live. Unfortunately, within six months, most of the women were back on the streets.

"They had no skills," Harris said. They did not know how to budget their income, and before they knew it, they would have spent their rent money. In response to this human crisis, Harris developed a program to teach life skills needed to survive independently. It worked. The percentage of women who returned to the shelter dropped from 60 percent to 5 percent, she said.

In addition, Harris instituted a "Team of Care" for follow-up support. "We adopt our women for life," she said. "When a woman becomes too ill to care for herself, she will have somewhere to die."

Harris, who is a Secular Franciscan herself, said government programs use a bandaid approach, whereas "we need to go deeper, have concern and love."

The reason her homeless women "are the way they are is because some adult didn't love them the way they should have been loved," Harris noted. "They did not receive what was necessary for them to grow."

"We have a generation that is yearning for the Lord. They do not feel that we offer them anything that relates to them. These kids are growing up with fear."

She challenged others to "stop patting me on the back" and go out and make a difference themselves.

"When the day comes, God is going to ask, 'How many of my children did you help bring home?'"

She concluded: "We are God's army. We really need to stand up and start marching."

The Peace Award is given annually to an individual, Catholic or non-Catholic, whose work and life reflect St. Francis' concern for God's creation, and for peace and justice. Ken Beattie, SFO, a critical care nurse from Greenfield, Wisconsin who chaired the Peace Award Committee, presented the award to Harris following Mass at Mission Santa Barbara, a 217-year-old Franciscan mission and retreat center.

###