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## St. Charles Parish Gives Generously Through Caritas Projects

By Ann Aubrey Hanson

IMPERIAL BEACH — He's called "Mr. Felix the Gentleman." Though homeless, Mr. Felix is one of the regular benefactors of the Caritas program at St. Charles Parish in Imperial Beach.

Program director Merlyn Baker says that she doesn't know where he stays or how to contact him, but she knows she can always find him at Mass on the third Sunday of every month, Caritas Day at St. Charles. A day for giving to help the poor.

During the weeks between Caritas Days, Mr. Felix collects cans and other recyclables, which he then sells. Every Caritas Day, he brings his earnings and deposits them in the Caritas collection baskets.

"This is really a case of the Widow's Mite," says Baker. "I can see the presence of God from his eyes."

Mr. Felix is not the only one who gives from

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his meager resources. There are many, many Widow's Mites going into the baskets, says Baker. She tells stories of children and elderly parishioners putting in dollar bills.

"After the collection, when we see so many dollar bills, we know that these people have given what they can," says Baker. "They are such good-hearted people. They are working-class people but their generosity is amazing. We are blessed. I believe God is really here in this work."

Baker is especially pleased to see the children donating to the charities.

"That's the start right there. When we are gone, they will do this work. They see what we are doing, and when their time comes, they will be our replacements some day."

The Caritas funds go to help the "really forgotten types of charities," both here in San Diego and in Tijuana, says Baker. They started with one charity, and now help support six others. Two of the charities are in San Diego and five are in Tijuana.

The organizations they help in Tijuana are: Casa de Cuna orphanage for children 0 to 6 years old; Santa Teresita home for girls from 6 to 12 years old; Casa Eudes home for girls from 13 to 20 years old; Asilo de Ancianos home for the elderly; and La Esperanza Clinic (Tijuana dumpsite area). In San Diego, they help Birthline, a women's resource center helping young mothers, and St. Charles Pastoral Charity, serving the

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homeless in Imperial Beach

The Caritas program began at St. Charles in 2001 with the approval of then-pastor Msgr. Dennis Mikulanic.

"He loves the poor," says Baker, and he gave his full support to the new ministry. Father Fernando Ramirez, current pastor at St. Charles Parish, is now a "wonderful support" for the program, "a great help."

At first, the program collected rice and beans to give to the poor, which they stored in the parish garage. Now, volunteers use donated funds to shop in bulk at Costco for basic food and cleaning necessities. Each charity receives \$500 worth of items each month.

On a typical Caritas Sunday, the group collects \$3,000. Anything over that amount is saved for the lean months, or is used for special projects, such as helping to buy something for the Esperanza Health Clinic in Tijuana.

"The Holy Spirit is right there," says Baker. "It's all God's work."

One hundred percent of donations go for buying the basics, says Baker. Because everyone who works for the ministry volunteers,

there are no overhead costs.

Each Saturday following Caritas Sunday, the Sisters of the Society of the Sacred Heart of Jesus from Casa de Cuna Catholic Orphanage in Tijuana come to San Diego and join Caritas volunteers for the monthly trip to Costco.

Food is purchased for the orphanage and other charities and for the food pantry at the parish, where people in need can receive two bags of canned food.

Caritas' next special project will take place on Aug. 6, when they plan to hand out baskets of food and other necessities to 200 families in La Esperanza dumpsite area of Tijuana.

Last year when they did the distribution, they had nothing for the children who came with their parents. This year, they plan to have candy and stuffed animals for the little ones.

Caritas is calling for volunteers on Saturday, July 2 and July 9, to help with packaging the food, bottles of shampoo and bars of soap for delivery to La Esperanza. Fifteen volunteers are needed. Distribution will take place on Saturday, Aug. 6.

Donations for the special project are most welcomed, says Baker.

In addition to the Esperanza food project, Caritas is trying to collect toothbrushes and tooth paste for the dental hygiene project at La Esperanza.

"We hope to help 2,000 kinder-



**GENEROSITY:** Children in Tijuana's Casa de Cuna orphanage are among the beneficiaries of Caritas funds raised by St. Charles parishioners.

garteners in the dumpsite area where 20,000 residents live," says Baker.

Some 500 toothbrushes and 875 tubes of toothpaste are still needed.

These items can be dropped off at

the St. Charles Parish Office or donors can call Baker at (619) 428-0199 or send her an email at mbaker2020@aol.com.

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