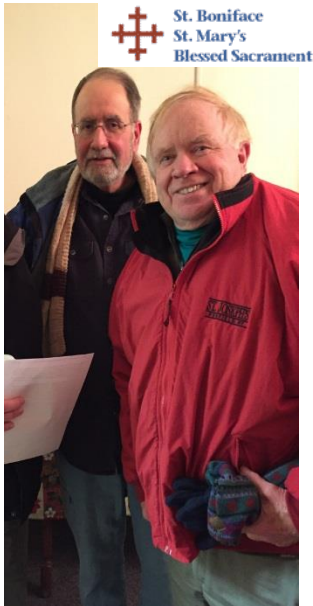


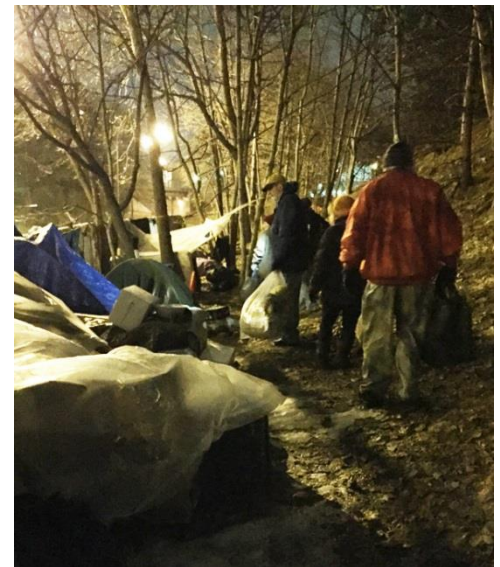
SJP PPC 2X2 Visit to St. Mary's Homeless Initiative, by Deb AuClair December 28, 2016

St. Joseph's Penfield Parishioner Pastoral Council field activity is in the works by the council members. SJP financially sponsors over 30 organizations so they can each carry on their mission, but we felt the need to meet those we serve where they are at. So rather than just send a check, Father Jim and Parish Council Chair, MaryAnn Lovelock, proposed that we visit the various ministries we support. They sent us out 2 x 2!



St. Mary's sponsors a monthly visit to check on the homeless of the city of Rochester. On Tuesday evening, December 27, 2016, Father Jim, Adam, Josh and I joined 6 others on their monthly mission. The deacon from St. Mary's shared some information about Rochester's homelessness. Rochester has the worst poverty level of children in our country, more than half of children live in poverty. To build on this statistic, on Jan. 2015 the Rochester Area Community Foundation, ROCAacts reported: "This is not the kind of national list that Rochester-area residents hope to top. Rochester now has more people living at less than half the federal poverty level than any other similarly-sized city in the U.S." I was astonished to hear from the deacon that there are approximately 1,000 homeless in Rochester. He said the homeless are made up of women, more men; some have mental illness, some even have day jobs, and some even have degrees but have found themselves between jobs without family support.

Fr. Jim and I weren't sure what to expect but Katie Denecke, a St. Joe's parishioner, is a member of this homeless ministry and is a tireless champion of the homeless for SJP. Although she couldn't attend she assured us that we would be okay. We met the other volunteers at St. Mary's Church on Oxford and Monroe. We were given a copy of Pope Francis' Christmas homily and it was very appropriate for our mission this evening. One key portion: "The mystery of Christmas, which is light and joy, challenges and unsettles us, because it is at once a mystery of hope and of sadness. It has a taste of sadness, inasmuch as love is not accepted, and life discarded. Such was the case with Joseph and Mary, who met with closed doors, and placed Jesus in a manger. Jesus was born, rejected by some and regarded by any others with indifference. **Yet Christmas has above all a taste of hope because, for all the darkness in our lives, God's light shines forth.** His gentle light does not frighten us. God, who is in love with us, draws us to himself with his tenderness, but being born poor and frail in our midst."



After prayer and discussion of logistics, we got in our cars to caravan to the homeless. There normally is a bus that takes the volunteers from homeless area to homeless area. This bus would have had sufficient room to pick up homeless who were interested in staying at a motel for the night. Tonight we would make room in our car caravan for the homeless. The ministry team has been going monthly

to visit the homeless, some for over 5 years and knew who was living in each homeless location. They knew who lived where and could tell what areas were abandoned. I will never overlook the areas that surround Rt. 490 throughout the city, now knowing that in those concrete and weeded areas homeless people live! Throughout the downtown area there is a city within a city. Although the temperature was 32 degrees and there was light precipitation, there was anticipation as we drove to each homeless area, parked our cars with flashers on, and turned our flashlights on to make sure we did not trip on the way to the dwellings. Some of the dwellings were under viaducts and near a construction area, and many were along a fenced portion of the highway. We went to "Tent City", an area between the fencing and Rt. 490. It was hard to believe a few blocks away from the Xerox Tower and the Strong Museum of Play were homeless dwellings. They are crude, but organized. Their "stuff" that they have been able to accumulate distributed in their "spots". I saw dwelling walls made of blankets, (like a fort you made when you were a kid), old mattresses, some quilts, discarded purses and pillows.



We approached their make shift shelters, walls made of plastic bags and rope and called in to them to let them know we were friends. We asked them if they needed any food, (packaged up by St. Joseph's RCIA candidates), toiletries, blankets and I heard something that made me hear God. This reinforced Pope Francis's homily, **"Yet Christmas has above all a taste of hope because, for all the darkness in our lives, God's light shines forth."** One of the occupants of one of the tents called out that he did not need any blankets, but he knew of others down the line of tents that could use some. Here was a homeless person looking beyond himself and helping others. If this is not God's light shining forth, I can't imagine what else it could be!



All we encountered were invited to come with us and we would drive them to Hotel 6 so they could spend the night in warmth. I found the homeless men we met kind and had gentle demeanors. Two of them welcomed an invitation to spend the night in the warm conditions offered by Motel 6. They came in our van and we talked while we drove to the motel. They were just like us, and knew more about current events that I did. I pride myself, coming from the Buffalo area, to know about the Buffalo Bills. They were on top of things, fans of the NY Giants and Yankees and told me that Rex Ryan, coach of the Bills, was fired that day!

I was wondering if this volunteer activity would be something for me, I felt a renewed sense of empathy for those in our society. I thought again of the words of Pope Francis, when he was Cardinal Bergoglio. His words for prisoners could just as easily fit the homeless. He said, "When we have the same weaknesses, why did you fall and I didn't? This is a mystery that

makes me pray and draws me to them.” Why did they fall and I didn’t? I have a duty to serve these people and I am blessed to be able to do it.

Other picture:

