

CATHOLIC SAN FRANCISCO

Northern California's Weekly Catholic Newspaper



"Jesus Appearing to the Disciples," acrylic-on-canvas painting by Deacon Leon Kortenkamp (See page 9.)

Pontiff's visit: faith, hope and love to be theme

By John Thavis

VATICAN CITY (CNS) — In a videotaped message, Pope Benedict XVI said he wants to bring a message of Christian hope to all Americans and to the United Nations when he visits next week.

"I shall come to the United States as pope for the first time to proclaim this great truth: Jesus Christ is hope for men and women of every language, race, culture and social condition," the pope said.

He said he intends to reach out spiritually to U.S. Catholics and show fratern-



(CNS PHOTO)

Pope Benedict XVI has videotaped a message about his upcoming visit to the United States and United Nations.

ity and friendship to other Christians, to followers of other religions and to all people of good will.

The text of the papal message, released at the Vatican April 8, was designed to set the thematic stage for the pope's April 15-20 visit to Washington and New York.

The pope read the text, mostly in English but with a short section in Spanish, while seated at a desk beneath a painting of Mary and Jesus.

Rather than focus on specific events, the pope spoke about the theme of his visit, "Christ Our Hope." Those three words express the Church's belief that Christ is

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Comunidad San Dimas

Ministry fosters hope, change in gang culture

By Michael Vick

Julio Escobar recalled driving along 24th Street in San Francisco's Mission District late last June looking for a particular corner. After parking, he walked to the corner of 24th and Balmy Street, and stopped outside a local taqueria. He was not there to eat.

Outside by a tree was a makeshift memorial to Edivaldo Sanchez, a 15-year-old boy who was shot to death on June 18. Escobar tried unsuccessfully to meet with the boy's mother, who lived just down the street, but she was not at home that day.

Sanchez, known as "Valdo" to friends, was a Mexican immigrant. He was killed in a gang-related drive-by shooting and collapsed outside the taqueria.

"This is the ministry," Escobar said. "It's not just Mass."

The ministry to which he refers is Comunidad San Dimas, launched in 1992 in response to two gang killings in one week near St. Peter Church in San Francisco.

Founded by Deacon Nate Bacon and his wife, Jenny, the ministry would eventually evolve into an outreach to young people detained in juvenile hall and youth involved in gang culture. The ministry, now online at www.comunidadesandimas.org, even has a transitional home for up to four young people trying to make the journey from gang life to productive citizenship.

"There were many young people in juvenile hall who were begging for a church service in Spanish," recalled Deacon Bacon in a video conference call from Guatemala, where he and his wife were doing mission work for InnerChange, the parent organization of Comunidad San Dimas. "We really saw that as our opening, and something that the Holy Spirit had arranged as a way of connecting with these kids who were involved in gangs in our neighborhood."

Deacon Bacon said the initial corps of volunteers included himself, his wife, the late Father Jack Isaacs

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School superintendent to attend DC audience

By Tom Burke

Maureen Huntington, superintendent of Catholic Schools for the Archdiocese of San Francisco, is one of about 400 Catholic educators who will hear Pope Benedict XVI talk about Catholic schools — elementary, secondary and college — at Catholic University of America in Washington, DC April 17.

"I will be leaving on the red eye the night before," Huntington told *Catholic San Francisco*.

"We meet with the pope on Thursday afternoon at

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Maureen Huntington

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and several St. Peter parishioners. The group was initially uninformed about the causes and motivations of gang violence, and knew little about gang culture.

"We were on a very steep learning curve," Deacon Bacon said. "The one thing that we had was a sincere love. The kids could feel it and they knew that we were genuine."

Deacon Bacon said it is important to maintain that level of honesty and integrity when working with people involved in gangs. On the street, the young people's lives often depend on the ability to read people to determine whether they were trustworthy, so the burgeoning Comunidad San Dimas would have to prove itself to be safe and reliable.

By reaching out to youth in the juvenile justice system, Deacon Bacon said the group has been able to set many people on a different and better path.

"We were able to build relationships with young people in a vulnerable state, and in a time of reflection," he said.

As the ministry matured, its volunteers began to better understand gang culture, and to grasp the underlying reasons why so many are attracted to it. For many who face constant hardship at home and who might not have the stability of two mature parents, the gang becomes a surrogate family.

"If the Church were to have anything to say to these kids, we would have to be family as well," Deacon Bacon said.

Comunidad San Dimas was originally called St. Peter's Youth Outreach. A young man in juvenile hall, Felipe, coined the new name. It refers to the traditional name of the "good thief," San Dimas, or St. Dismas, who hung on the cross beside Jesus.

"It's really been a wellspring of meaning for us over the years," said Deacon Bacon of the name. "Felipe identified with San Dimas as someone who had received the love of Jesus even in his worst moments."

Deacon Bacon said the name struck a chord with him as well. "Jesus was always hanging out with the riffraff of society – the tax collectors the prostitutes, the sinners. Even in his death, you see Jesus present between two death-row criminals."

This notion of Jesus' presence in the lives of society's undesirables resonated with the young men and women whom Comunidad San Dimas serves.

"What we say to young people is, 'Jesus still is extremely present on the corners where you're kicking it with your homies, in juvenile hall, and in jail,'" Deacon Bacon said.

That attitude drew Leycar Vallecillo, 23, to the program. Already on the road to redemption through the work of his local church, Vallecillo saw a flyer for Comunidad San Dimas during a trip to the library a year ago.

Vallecillo wanted to join the ministry not just for his own benefit, but to help others caught in gang life. Though he cannot be a part of the juvenile hall ministry because he is still on probation, Vallecillo is an active volunteer for the group.

"The program helped me, because I see a lot of people changing," Vallecillo said, adding that change takes a long-term commitment. "Other guys, older than me, tell me, 'Hey, doing this is a process.'"

Vallecillo immigrated from León, Nicaragua when he was 15. Just three weeks after his arrival, he joined the Surreño gang after a Surreño protected him from the members of the rival Norteño gang who jumped him on his way home from school.

After years in the violent, self-destructive gang world, Vallecillo realized his life was going nowhere. He started going to church, and has not looked back.

"You have to change your mind every time, every day, and the Lord helps you," Vallecillo said.

Ministry Director Escobar said understanding is crucial to bridge the gap between the Church and the street corners. Juvenile halls and jail cells are part of the daily experience of youth trapped in the gang culture, he said. To combat misunderstanding, the group intensively trains its volunteers.

The training sessions are spread over three consecutive Saturdays, a total of 24 hours of instruction. After completing the training, volunteers must commit to at least four hours of ministry every week, and must attend the monthly ministry meeting.

The group's years of experience underscores that young people's lives can only change through long-term, sustained commitment. "You have to be tolerant, patient and persevere in our ministry," Escobar said.

Among the training topics are the roots of gang culture, both historical and sociological. Volunteers hear testimonials from parents and youth impacted by gang violence and drugs. They must also learn about gang signals, colors and tattoos, both for information and for their own safety.

All volunteers undergo background and reference checks, and complete state-mandated requirements for entering juvenile detention centers. Training is offered in English and Spanish. Most liturgical services are in Spanish, but there are bilingual services as well. There are program participants who do not speak Spanish, and not all are Latino.



Members of rival gangs, one Norteño (left) and two Surreños, pitch a tent at a camping trip in Big Sur. The youths, normally enemies, lived together for the weekend trip, sponsored by Comunidad San Dimas.

At the end of the arduous process, the volunteers embark on a journey of forming friendly and ultimately familial bonds with young gang members. A focus on the relational aspect of transformational change sets Comunidad San Dimas apart, its leaders say.

"These youth need a lot of attention, support and direction," Escobar said. "If anyone is going to come and not be able to provide that, then it's best that people don't show up. We don't need another stepping-stone for them to fall over. They have enough already."

Escobar said successes have been hard-won and are often difficult to measure.

"One word can make a difference in their lives," he explained. "Sometimes that word won't really pop up until the time is right. Until they're ready to make that change, we can't walk alone."

In the case of José Diaz, a former member of the Surreño gang, the courage to change came from the prompting of friend and fellow former gang member Vallecillo, who introduced him to Comunidad San Dimas.

Diaz, 20, came to the United States from Guadalajara, Mexico when he was nine. He joined the gang in middle school. He wanted to be like his brother, also a former Surreño. He also said he felt pressure to join the gang to survive the violence surrounding him.

After spending time in a federal prison in Arizona, Diaz took the time to reflect on where his life was headed. He did not like what he saw.

"It was a bad experience, but I had a lot of things to think about," said Diaz, who joined Comunidad San Dimas nine months ago. "I was thinking about being in a gang. It's stupid. It just gets you in trouble."

The changed attitude Comunidad San Dimas fosters has not only taken place in the lives of the youth, but also those working for their rehabilitation. José Peñate-Aceves, head of Comunidad San Dimas, said during his 13 years with the organization he has seen changes in the lives of everyone involved.

"I am so happy that God has called me to be a witness to the miracles that are happening in this ministry," Peñate-Aceves said. Miracles he has seen have changed his life as well. "Through this ministry I've learned to be a really good father, a really good husband, and it also healed my own wounds I have been carrying for many years."

Peñate-Aceves explained that in the course of coming to know so many young people, touchstones of similarity between their stories and his own have helped nurture deeper relationships.

One such experience is the friendship Peñate-Aceves developed with one young man in the program, Enrique Rosales. Rosales, 23, never became involved in a gang, but made other poor decisions that left his life in shambles.

Born in 1985 in San Salvador, El Salvador, Rosales came to the United States in 2000. He had a work permit but limited skills and no knowledge of English. He could only find employment at restaurants as a busboy and waiter.

"It was frustrating, so I tried to find a way out, a way to socialize," Rosales said. "Unfortunately I found it with the wrong people."

Drinking and smoking marijuana with his new "friends" eventually led Rosales to a life of cocaine abuse. Soon he was showing up late to work and was fired. He wound up on the street, living in a homeless encampment under the onramp to Highway 101 on Cesar Chavez Street in San Francisco.

"One of the worst experiences for me was one night when it was raining and we didn't have anything to cover ourselves," Rosales said. "I was shaking, and I've got a guy next to me shooting heroin, and another guy next to me vomiting because he was kicking crack. And I was like, 'What am I doing here?'"

With no prospects and no home, Rosales turned to shop-

lifting. That is how he landed in juvenile hall, where he met Peñate-Aceves and Comunidad San Dimas.

Once he got out, Rosales lived at the group's transitional home, Casa San Dimas, next door to Peñate-Aceves. He spent three days in the home's detoxification room, where he faced a head-on battle with what both he and Peñate-Aceves said were demonic forces.

"I was lying down, and it was dark," Rosales said. "I could feel a pressure on my chest, and it was just an indescribable feeling that someone was there to destroy me. But I knew José was praying for me."

Peñate-Aceves said the battle came to him as well, on both a spiritual and a physical level.

"I was at peace, praying for him, and then I felt something strong hit me in my chest," Peñate-Aceves said. "I got scared, but I kept calm and continued praying."

Rosales survived the ordeal, and spent time in an intensive recovery program, Teen Challenge, in Ceres, Calif. He later returned to San Francisco, and has been involved in Comunidad San Dimas ever since.

Though the focus has always been realistic, attempting to build change one youth at a time, these small changes can lead to big results rarely seen on the streets. Peñate-Aceves described one such event during a camping trip sponsored by Comunidad San Dimas.

Far away from the troubles of the city in the wilderness of Big Sur, Peñate-Aceves witnessed what had been a culmination of his dreams for reconciliation when members of two rival gangs, the Norteños and Surreños, lived side-by-side. As a general rule, Peñate-Aceves said, members of these rival gangs will fight on sight without apparent provocation.

The reconciliation started slowly. Peñate-Aceves encouraged the boys to use the time away to enjoy themselves and not to give into instincts to take rivalries into the campground.

"They did not become good friends, but they got along," Peñate-Aceves said. "I didn't see them shake hands, but I did see that they could be together in one place. That gave me the confirmation that, yes, this is my dream and I will follow it."

Peñate-Aceves has seen pieces of that experience since, and has even seen members of the rival gangs shaking hands in friendship. Ultimately, though, he and his colleagues give the credit to the man who hung on the cross beside St. Dismas.

"They will become one – Norteño and Surreño together," Peñate-Aceves said. "With Jesus in the middle, it's possible to make peace."



Artist and Comunidad San Dimas member Victor A. "Spider" uses pencil and paper to portray both the despair of gang life and the hope of salvation through Jesus Christ.