

putting  
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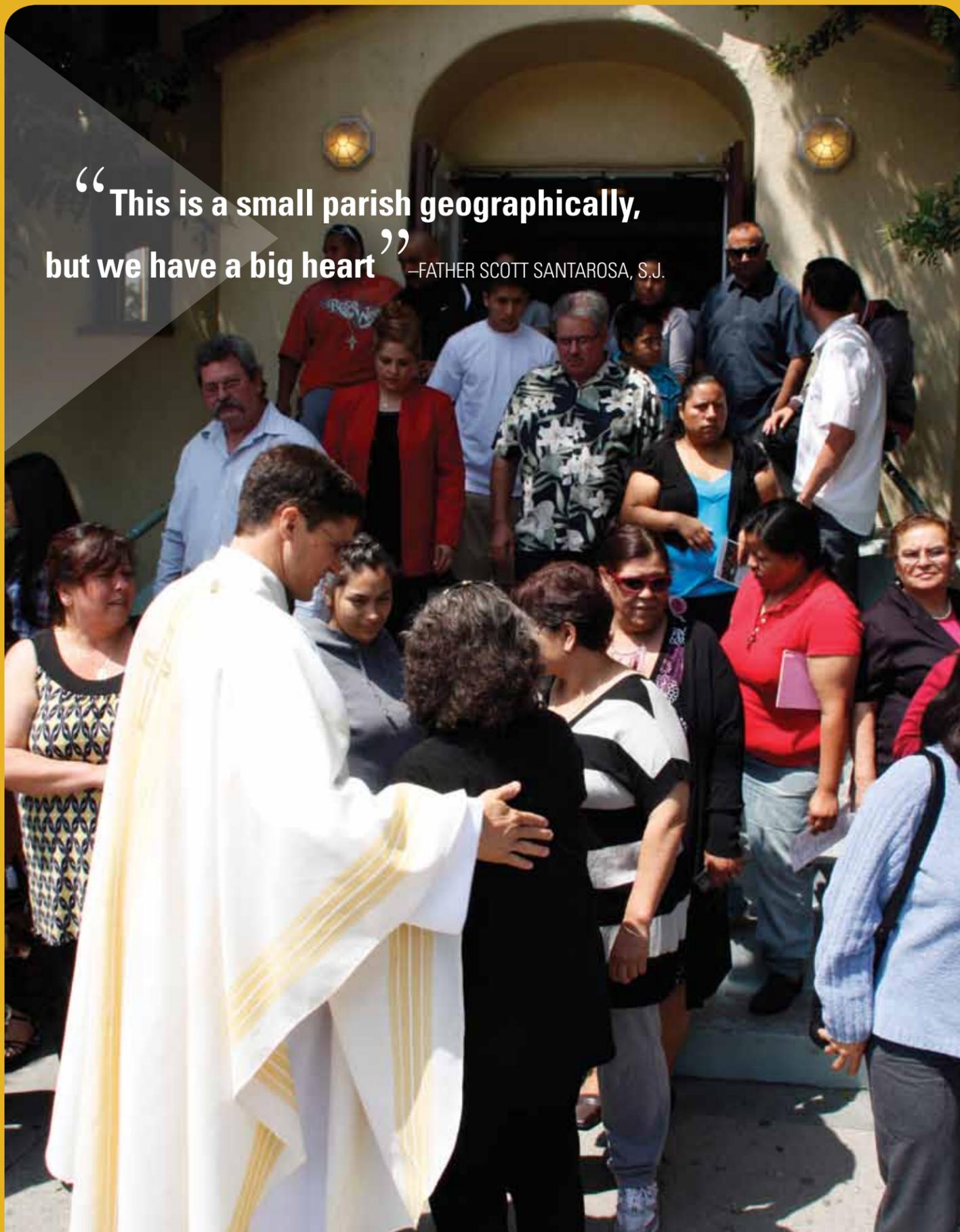
# ACTION

Dolores Mission and Proyecto Pastoral build  
a better way of life in East Los Angeles

BY SUSAN WAMPLER  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROBERT DOLAN, S.J.

After Mass each Sunday, parishioners gather in front of Dolores Mission Church before heading to a canopied plaza where a food sale raises funds for activities. This view looks west to downtown Los Angeles.

“This is a small parish geographically,  
but we have a big heart”  
—FATHER SCOTT SANTAROSA, S.J.



Pastor Scott Santarosa, S.J., greets parishioners after 10:30 a.m. Mass.



Green-shirted volunteers Estelita Garcia and Rosa Campos from Safe Passage/Camino Seguro stand watch at a corner to see that students walk safely to and from school.

“In the words of St. Ignatius, love is shown more  
in deeds than words.”  
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Looking west out the office window of Father Scott Santarosa, S.J., the downtown Los Angeles skyline looms large, but it feels a world away from the sometimes harsh reality of life in the Boyle Heights area of East Los Angeles that Dolores Mission has called home since 1925.

The Jesuits of the California Province took over Dolores Mission in 1980 when no one else was willing to minister to the poorest parish in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, a parish located in an embattled community where some 16 gangs were operating in a 2-square-mile area. Two public housing projects—Aliso Village and

Pico Gardens—dominated the neighborhood and produced new gang members at an alarming rate.

“A number of the parishioners had sons who were gang members, or were gang members themselves,” says Fr. Santarosa, pastor of Dolores Mission. “Those first Jesuits who came here understood they were called to serve everyone in this community, including gang members. They took seriously the question of ‘what is God inviting us to do to live the Gospel in these streets and alleyways here and now?’ Asking that question in that way is what continues to give life to this parish.”



**“Dolores Mission is the faith that inspires the action. Proyecto Pastoral is the action.”**

—FATHER SCOTT SANTAROSA, S.J.

The Jesuits who have served here over the past three decades have sought to answer that question by working hand in hand with residents and community leaders to address the problems facing the predominately Latino neighborhood. Out of their collaboration grew Proyecto Pastoral at Dolores Mission, which began as Dolores Mission’s social justice arm but became an independent nonprofit in 1986. (In turn, Proyecto Pastoral spun off Homeboy Industries, founded by Father Greg Boyle, S.J., while he was pastor of Dolores Mission; it became a separate entity in 2001.)

Although Proyecto Pastoral operates independently of Dolores Mission, its work is inextricably intertwined. For instance, the Guadalupe Homeless Project,

which provides emergency shelter to 650 men and meals to 900 men annually, is funded and operated by Proyecto Pastoral, while parishioners cook and serve the meals. Dolores Mission literally provides sanctuary: Most of the men sleep inside the church itself. Proyecto also offers after-school enrichment programs and early-childhood education centers, both of which are offered at two locations, including Dolores Mission.

“We want to leverage each other’s resources to best meet the needs of this community,” says Cynthia Sanchez, executive director of Proyecto Pastoral. “It’s a unique and powerful partnership.” Fr. Santarosa adds, “Dolores Mission is the faith that inspires the action. Proyecto Pastoral is the action. When we’re doing

our jobs well, you can’t tell the difference between the two.”

### FOSTERING SAFE PASSAGE IN THE COMMUNITY

One of the most visible displays of community empowerment is Proyecto’s Safe Passage/Camino Seguro program. Twice every school day, volunteers in bright green T-shirts and jackets emerge from their homes and offices to help children walk to and from school safely. The program’s 70 volunteers support not only those enrolled in the K-8 Dolores Mission School, but also high-school students at Mendez Learning Center, which opened in 2009 across from Proyecto Pastoral’s offices 4 blocks from Dolores Mission.

“In the words of St. Ignatius, love is shown more in deeds than words,” says Fr. Santarosa. “That means not just sitting behind a locked door and being afraid. The laypeople and Jesuits who came before me have inculcated a sense of

responsibility in our parish.”

That sense of responsibility is also evident in the Dolores Mission Safety Project, a community policing effort. The parish works closely with the Los Angeles Police Department to ensure that residents feel comfortable calling 911 when they notice suspicious activity, without fear of being asked about their immigration status.

The theme of “safe passage” is an apt description for many of Proyecto’s and Dolores Mission’s other programs as well. The Guadalupe Homeless Project provides a safe transition for the mostly immigrant population who have come to the United States to find a way out of poverty. The program not only offers 90-day temporary shelter and meals, but also teaches clients to take proactive steps to find employment and permanent housing. Many of the men served by the program later return to Dolores Mission as volunteers to help others in need.

Clients of the Guadalupe Homeless

Project, as well as reformed gang members at Homeboy Industries, are encouraged to select free attire appropriate for job interviews at Proyecto’s Thrift Store, which is open to the public and also provides employment and training for community residents.

### TEACHING STUDENTS TO USE TALENTS AND GIFTS

Proyecto’s after-school programs and early-childhood education centers give area youth meaningful academic enrichment opportunities while serving as a deterrent to their joining a gang. The IMPACTO after-school program provides academic support for 200 children ages 5-18, while the early-childhood education centers serve some 76 children ranging from 18 months to 5 years of age, preparing them for kindergarten and helping them develop their English-language skills.

“Dolores Mission has been a beacon of hope for this neighborhood over the past 30 years,” says Father Joseph Spieler, S.J.,

**Top left:** Church volunteers fill plates to be served to clients of the Guadalupe Homeless Project in the Dolores Mission School cafeteria. **Center:** Men pause for prayer. **Far right:** Each night 30 to 50 homeless men sleep in the church, retiring around 8:30 p.m. and rising at 5 a.m.

who served as co-pastor from 1982-1986 and returned in 2008. The grassroots activism of the parishioners, in turn, inspires the priests and leaders of Dolores Mission and Proyecto Pastoral.

A prime example of this grassroots activism is the base ecclesial communities or comunidades eclesiales bases (CEBs) that Fr. Spieler and co-pastor Jose Luis Estrada, S.J., launched in the mid-1980s. Dolores Mission's seven CEBs are each comprised of 8 to 12 parishioners who meet every week in one another's homes to read the Gospel and reflect on what God is inviting them to do.

"The CEBs represent a way for people to put their faith into action—to create better opportunities for their families and to give hope for a better life," adds Cynthia Sanchez.

One of the most significant ways Dolores Mission is helping families to achieve better outcomes is through the Dolores Mission School, which currently serves some 211 K-8 students and has the capacity to grow to at least 250 children. Some 70 percent of parents are monolingual Spanish-speakers.

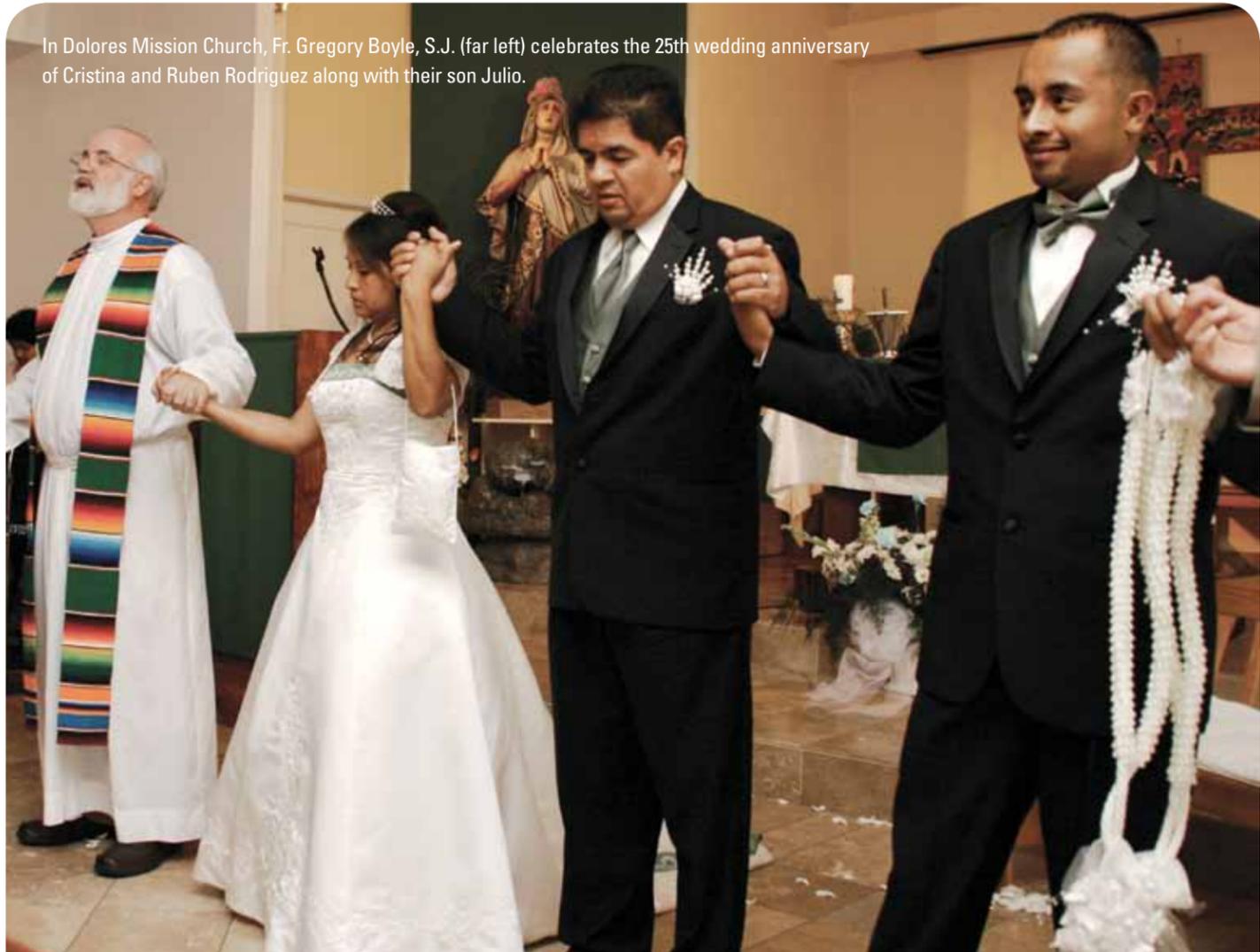
According to Principal Karina Moreno, "Our philosophy is to start a college-going culture from kindergarten." Students are urged to continue their education at Catholic high schools and charter schools where a high percentage of graduates go on to college.

"We are in an area where schools traditionally fail to give students the tools they need for success," adds Moreno. Dolores Mission School emphasizes critical thinking skills and application of learning to real

life. "We're teaching students to use their gifts and talents to be successful in life as well as in college," she says.

Shortly before Moreno joined the school three years ago, a new third floor was constructed, including a new science lab, art room, and computer lab. The curriculum was redesigned to integrate arts and technology into the classroom; test scores have improved dramatically since then.

Moreno says she was drawn to the school because of its potential to become a premier learning center and because of the connection with the Jesuit parish. "I've worked at places where the church and school are really separate. That's not the way it is here. I see the combined strength of the church, school, and Proyecto Pastoral. There's a strong sense of community here."



In Dolores Mission Church, Fr. Gregory Boyle, S.J. (far left) celebrates the 25th wedding anniversary of Cristina and Ruben Rodriguez along with their son Julio.

**“Dolores Mission has been a beacon of hope for this neighborhood over the past 30 years”** —FATHER JOSEPH SPIELER, S.J.



At Dolores Mission School, teacher Nicole Hill (above left) engages her fourth-grade class, while other students (above right) work on assignments.

### A SMALL PARISH WITH A BIG HEART

Collectively, Dolores Mission Parish, Dolores Mission School, and Proyecto Pastoral have helped build that sense of community. They serve as sources of inspiration for residents as well as people who live far beyond the neighborhood. "This is a small parish geographically, but we have a big heart," says Fr. Santarosa. "Dolores Mission plays a symbolic role in the California Province. We can call atten-

tion to larger issues, such as the immigration debate."

Some 600 to 800 people attend services on any given Sunday. High-school and college students from all over the country routinely visit Dolores Mission for service immersions. Young Jesuits often are called to the parish as well.

"This is a wonderful training site for new Jesuits," says Fr. Spieler. "We're able to apply a lot of our Jesuit values here." ❀

### TO GIVE

To make a gift to Dolores Mission Parish, Dolores Mission School, or Proyecto Pastoral, please send your contribution to the California Province Advancement Office, P.O. Box 68, Los Gatos, CA 95031; or use the easy and secure Online Donation Form on our website: [www.jesuitscalifornia.org](http://www.jesuitscalifornia.org)