



Sisters of Notre Dame

California Province

SR. CRISTINA MARIE BUCZKOWSKI, *Encountering the needs of Boyle Heights children*

Since September, Sr. Cristina Marie Buczkowski has been serving at Dolores Mission Elementary School in Boyle Heights, teaching the school's second grade class of 29 eager and willing students. According to the school's website, "Dolores Mission School is a Catholic parish grade school (TK through Grade 8) committed to serving low-income families in Los Angeles...Our students and their families are part of a larger faith community with a rich cultural identity. As an integral part of a Jesuit parish, our goal is to empower our children to rise out of poverty by becoming educated leaders in their community, 'women and men for and with others.'"

According to the United States Census Bureau, the median household income in Boyle Heights is \$43,519. Approximately 33% of the children under 18 live below the poverty line.

Although Sr. Cristina Marie is bilingual and has an extensive background as an educator with degrees from California State University Long Beach and Loyola Marymount University, she found her transition to Dolores Mission to be a bit of a challenge. The school's ethnic population is 96% Latino, with 50% of the parents or guardians speaking only Spanish. Total enrollment is 270 students, with many students receiving some form of financial aid.

Among Sr. Cristina Marie's first impressions was the observation that the children seemed to have a sense of security while in the classrooms and at play. She said, "The school is a buffer for this community. They [the children] know the realities of home, such as broken families, gang violence, or incarcerated parents. But to be able to experience the community that we have at this school is to experience an oasis and safe refuge--all based on our faith."

In the educational tradition of the Sisters of Notre Dame, Sr. Cristina Marie finds herself living out the role of the Notre Dame educator as gospel witness. As stated in the Educational Vision and Principles of the Sisters of Notre Dame, "We follow Jesus, our Master Teacher, and give witness to his spirit of compassion, hope and joy, especially to those who experience poverty in its various forms."

As she completes her first year at Dolores Mission School, Sr. Cristina Marie looks back with a sense of hope for her students' future. Though very much aware of the hardships they face, she radiates a positive attitude as a smile illuminates her face, noting "There is a way of looking and being in the world today which is countercultural--and that is the way of faith."