



St. Jude School Principal Kathryn Piguet with students. "This is my family."



EVANGELIZATION HAPPENS ONE BY ONE

**IN A SCHOOL WHERE BOTH CATHOLICISM
AND NATIVE CULTURE ARE IMPORTANT**

Ambitious plans call for a new school at the site

If the Soboba Indian Reservation is at the beginning of evangelization, as Marianna Torrano, RSCJ, has said, then the chief evangelist at St. Jude School here is Principal Kathy Piguet. For Mrs. Piguet it is simple: St. Jude is a Catholic school. She wants to share the good news of Jesus' love and life with her students.

The uniqueness of St. Jude, however, is not only its Catholicism, but also the strong emphasis on the culture and traditions of the Native people, most of whom are members of the Soboba Band of the Luiseño Indians. It's a matter of "sustainability" to Mrs. Piguet.

"They need to know their roots. It is going to help them sustain this tribe. The elders want this," she said, referring to the tribal leaders who wield much influence on the reservation and whose endorsement can go a long way toward a venture's success.

"It's a way to help bring them (the students) together with their families, with their aunts and uncles, their cousins," she said.

The tiny school currently has about thirty-five students in grades kindergarten through five in three classrooms, double the size from a year ago. When it opened in September 2004, before Mrs. Piguet's arrival, it had a total of six students – four in kindergarten and two in first grade.

Mrs. Piguet said the guidance of the Society of the Sacred Heart has been essential to the success of the school and to its objective of creating a curriculum that respects and reflects the Native culture.

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“They are the heart and soul of it,” she said of the RSCJ. “When Sister Torrano came here the people said ‘teach our children,’ and this is the response to that,” she said.

Sister Torrano, in her humility, tosses off the praise. “Just being here is amazing to me; in the way I’ve been led here by Christ,” she said.

Today, her school is considered one of only three Catholic Native schools in the entire United States. In the beginning, there was no guarantee that it would work, despite the great patience and the strong faith in the possibilities that are everywhere here.

“I put a lot of my eggs in this basket,” she said of the school.

The Missionaries of the Sacred Heart (MSC) here—a priest and two sisters—were collaborators with the RSCJ in establishing the school and other educational outreach efforts throughout the reservation. In a recent MSC newsletter dedicated to the school, Sister Mary Seibert, MSC, frames education in the broad issue of missionary outreach to the Native Americans.

“As missionaries, we can so readily get caught up in the idea that we will bring God to the Native Americans, yet we forget God is already there. God is very much a part of their culture and life though



expressed in terms that may seem foreign to us. Recognizing God’s presence causes our hope for the future to blossom amid the difficulties we experience,” Sister Mary said.

Mike Madrigal, a lay minister at St. Joseph’s parish, which is affiliated with the school, said the people on the reservation are very pleased with the cultural efforts maintained at the school.

“We fully appreciate our Catholic and Native American heritage. There isn’t just one way to do it, but the school is a very good way,” he said.

Mrs. Piguet is very serious about helping the students discover the spiritual dimension of their own culture and about the Catholic mission of the school. Faith is taught and celebrated, not only for its beliefs, but also that students might come to a personal experience of God. Each year a number of students ask to receive the sacrament of baptism.

There is emotion in her voice as she talks about her love of the students.

“This is my family,” she said softly. “And if I’m having a bad day, they sense it. And if they’re having a bad day, I sense it. There’s a mutual caring, and there is empathy. Some of these kids just need someone to care. Some are desperate for this,” she said.

The school is on a firm footing and growth is anticipated. The MSC newsletter featuring St. Jude gave most of the credit to Sister Torrano. “In July of this year (2007), Sister Marianna found another classroom and toilet block for St. Jude. The seeds of patience, prayer and hope have gotten us this far.”

If Sister Torrano keeps to her plan, a future MSC newsletter will highlight an expanded St. Jude School that goes all the way to the eighth grade in a gleaming new building. She has the architect’s drawings for it and has begun laying the plans for fund-raising efforts to pay for the estimated 1.2- to -1.5 million dollar school building, probably to be completed in three phases. It will take a lot of prayer, she said, and a little support from many, many people.

Principal Kathy Piguet is a strong believer in the project.

“It will happen,” she said, reflecting as much confidence in herself as in Sister Torrano’s dream.

“I build schools,” she said, referring to past experiences. “And I don’t give up on children.” ✦

Beauty in the desert: students attend Mass regularly at St. Joseph’s Catholic Church.

