

Hope for Troubled Youth

Young offenders are finding faith in a chapel built by Massachusetts Knights

By Thomas Bold

The Metropolitan Youth Service Center in Dorchester, Mass., has a new spiritual home for adolescents incarcerated at its juvenile corrections facility. It's called the Chapel of Hope, and Massachusetts Knights of Columbus are the driving force behind the effort.

Father Joseph J. Baggetta, a Fourth Degree Knight and former Massachusetts state chaplain, is a chaplain in the state's Department of Youth Services-Juvenile Justice System. For years he dreamed of providing a sacred space away from the correctional facility for the young men under his care. He wanted a chapel separate from the facility so it would seem more like a church in the community. "I wanted the kids to have to come outside during the four seasons, out of the main building for a short time, and they would travel to a church," he said.

St. Francis inspired Father Baggetta to build the Chapel of Hope. While praying in the Church of San Damiano, Francis looked at the crucifix and heard Christ say to him: "Go, rebuild my church..." Father Baggetta heard something similar when he looked at the San Damiano cross in his office one day.

" 'O.K,' I said, 'I will build it, but I need help...a lot of help,' " Father Baggetta said, recalling his thoughts. The project had to be financially independent from his office or the state, and all the construction work had to be done by the chaplain's office.

So, Father Baggetta turned to the Knights.

TURNING A TRAILER INTO A CHAPEL

Father Baggetta acquired a 12-foot by 60-foot trailer like those used on construction sites. This became the chapel's shell. Knights from throughout the state gave up weekends to work on transforming the trailer into a place of prayer. They added a new roof and skirting, scraped paint and repainted both the interior and exterior. They laid cement walkways and landscaped the area.

Inside the trailer, the Knights installed stained-glass windows, new lighting, air conditioners, a new ceiling and new walls.

One of the final projects was to hang a Knights of Columbus emblem on the outside of the Chapel of Hope.

Father Baggetta recalls that before one of the first Masses he celebrated at the new chapel there was some confusion about who or what the "K of C" was.

"I always send a sign-up sheet to the units," he said. "On a normal day, less than half the kids will sign up for chapel. The day of the first Mass everyone signed up. Something had to be wrong, I thought. ... So I called over one of the kids who always attends Mass and asked him why everyone wanted to come to chapel. The young man tells me, 'Oh, they all saw the 'K of C' sign on the chapel; they think they are going to KFC (Kentucky Fried Chicken).' "

Half of the inmates still came after the sign was explained to them. "They did get fed, their hearts and souls, with the Gospel message of hope," said Father Baggetta. "And, yes, we did buy them all Kentucky Fried Chicken instead of doughnuts."

'THE KNIGHTS ARE MY BROTHERS'

Despite that initial confusion, the Chapel of Hope has been true to its name for the young men at the Metropolitan Youth Service Center.

"Since attending the Chapel of Hope, I have begun to experience something I never felt before — forgiveness and reconciliation," said Scott, age 16. "If God and others can forgive me, I guess I can forgive others. I see there is another way in life. I am a gang member and the gang is my family. I am going to try to leave the gang. I see that faith can be my new family. I see that I can forgive and let go of past hurts. The only one I can change is myself. The Knights made this all possible. The Chapel of Hope is not just a chapel; it is a healing place."

Juan, 16, says the Chapel of Hope has given him a second chance in life. "My father is a member of the Knights. I would help him in helping others doing various projects. Little did I know that someday the Knights would be helping me. I made a bad decision in my life, and now I have to take responsibility for it. I am learning from it and going on with my life. The Chapel of Hope gives me hope. It's a place that I go to pray, to ask for forgiveness and to receive Christ's unconditional love."

Matt, 18, said he found a family at the Chapel of Hope. "I really had no guidance growing up. My positive memories are few. I have a wonderful memory now: I made my first Communion in the Chapel of Hope. I have a family now. Now it is the family of the Church, and the Knights are my brothers."

ROLE MODELS

Massachusetts Knights are still involved in the Chapel of Hope, maintaining the chapel and making repairs as necessary. Knights and families also hold an annual benefit cookout for the chapel.

Anthony Kirk, a staff member at the Chapel of Hope, credits the Knights with turning young lives around.

"This sacred place is where kids at risk come to be fed," he said. "Their souls, hearts and minds are fed with positive, Christian-Catholic values. They learn how to pray. They learn how to live and treat others with respect. They do the readings and serve at Mass. The Knights took positive action. They did something. They gave hope to kids who have so little, who live in despair, who live in a world of violence."

Father Baggetta says the Chapel of Hope is a great gift from his brother Knights. "So many people want to do something to stop the violence on our streets. There is a lot of talk but not much action. The Knights of Columbus just don't talk, they do. They're stopping the violence on our streets, one kid at a time."

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