

## *Saint Antoninus Parish to host volunteers*

# Mission immersion seeks 'prayer warriors for peace'

BY MELISSA MCNALLY

Staff Writer

NEWARK—Too often the true spirit of Christmas is marred by a consumer culture interested in getting the newest gadget instead of giving back to the community. The birth of Our Savior and His message of hope and giving are outshined by the glitzy decorations and lure of bustling shopping centers.

From Jan. 3-9, 2011, the Gratia Plena Evangelical Community at Saint Antoninus Parish, 337 South Orange Ave., will host volunteers in a "mission immersion" week.

Along with morning and evening prayer, volunteers will reside at the parish while helping out at a local soup kitchen, visit the elderly at a nursing home and build housing for the less fortunate with Habitat for Humanity. Plans also include a bus trip to New York to minister to the homeless and daily Mass with eucharistic adoration.

Mark Mattheiss, one of the organizers of the evangelical community who is also music director at Ramapo College, Mahwah, said the idea for local ministry was sparked after a summer mission trip to Glenmary Farm, KY.

"You don't have to go to Africa, Honduras or even out of the state to help out," he said. "Newark is our mission field. You realize how blessed you are and that we can be prayer warriors for peace."

A South Orange native, Mattheiss renewed his faith and passion for ministry while volunteering with the Touch the World organization in 2004. "We helped build a school for 120 students in Juarez, Mexico. I thought I knew what poverty was until I went over there," he recalled. "I always had faith but since that trip, I am not shy about sharing it. Our culture is not very Christian-friendly, but I know what God has done in my life. I realized that if I just opened myself more to Christ, I would see greater things happen."

Mattheiss has reached out to his own students at Ramapo College as well as other universities in the area to participate in the mission immersion. He encourages everyone, from college students to retirees to stay-at-home moms, to come out and volunteer.

Making sacrifices for the good of others is Jesus' message and the true spirit of the season, according to Mattheiss. "Mission immersion is about living in a Catholic community and loving others with the love God gives us. That's what Christmas is really about; emulating what Jesus did and bringing His love to all people."

College students, during the break between semesters, are most likely looking forward to a few weeks away from their hectic academic lives. However, Mattheiss encourages young people to look deeper and assures that volunteering not only benefits the community, but also those who help out.

"There is no way I can describe to you what it feels like to minister to others," he said. "I tell the students that it will be a life-changing experience. It is so rewarding; we are blessed even more than the people we help."

Father William P. Sheridan, the pastor of Immaculate Conception Parish, Mahwah, said he admires Mattheiss' work with students at Ramapo College. The two have worked together during the last four years through Ramapo's Catholic Campus Ministry program.

"Mark is a very upbeat individual," Fr. Sheridan said. "He has the love of the Lord and is on fire with the Word. Mark is very energetic. He brings that kind of love and commitment and shows it to students."

Saint Antoninus Parish can accommodate up to 20 volunteers for the mission immersion week. Each day begins with 7 a.m. prayer and 8:15 a.m. Mass. Busses commute the group to different work sites throughout the area. Participants return to the parish by 4 p.m. followed by dinner and evening prayer. For more information, contact Mattheiss by phone at (973) 489-0509 or e-mail ([mark@mjlmmusic.com](mailto:mark@mjlmmusic.com)).



Mark Mattheiss