

# ‘No one here is unimportant’

By Guillermo Contreras, San Antonio Express-News December 24, 2017

Under a crisp, blue sky, about 100 people — many of them homeless — gathered at the Catholic Worker House on Christmas Eve to feast on tamales and enrich their souls.

“There is not one of us who doesn’t count,” Father John Markey told the group assembled outdoors at the Dignowity Hill shelter. “There is no person here who isn’t needed. No one here is unimportant. ... Everyone has a place at the table, and each of us counts in a special and unique way.”

The words had significant meaning for some of those facing struggles the average person doesn’t, whose plight often makes them invisible and seemingly unworthy to others.

For them, the Catholic Worker House is a warm place of camaraderie, of belonging. It’s a small but tight-knit community at the nonprofit, volunteers and clients say.

“I’d just be walking around in circles,” said Jesse Maldonado, 24, if the Catholic Worker House hadn’t been open Sunday.



*Top Left:* People pray during a mass held Sunday Dec. 24, 2017 at the Catholic Worker House.

*Top Right:* Catholic Worker House volunteers Courtney Cash (from center left), with his son Jonathan, 9-months, wife Tonya and others pray during a mass held Sunday Dec. 24, 2017 at the Catholic Worker House.

The Catholic Worker House at 626 E. Nolan St. has been feeding stomachs and souls since 1985, seeking to provide relief to those who are aimless, anxious, lonely and hungry.

Founder Dee Sanchez, cites Matthew 25:35 in describing part of the nonprofit’s mission: “When I was hungry, you fed me.”

“At Catholic Worker House, people can come and see the people we serve,” Sanchez said. “It’s not what is done. It’s how it’s done. What they do here is small work, done lovingly.”

Sunday, the feast included breakfast tacos, biscuits with gravy and other good food in addition to the traditional tamales. And they sang Christmas carols, including “Silent Night.” But first volunteers and clients attended Mass together, celebrated by Markey, director of the Ph.D. program at the Oblate School of Theology.

“We’re not celebrating an anniversary, or (just) a birthday,” Markey told the group. “We’re celebrating a new beginning.”



*Top Left:* Father John Markey leads a mass Sunday Dec. 24, 2017 at the Catholic Worker House.

*Top Right:* Father John Markey leads a mass Sunday Dec. 24, 2017 at the Catholic Worker House.

As part of his sermon, Markey likened God’s plan to puzzles, saying there are no leftover pieces or pieces that don’t fit — Jesus came to save everyone, he said, whether they be rich or poor, clothed or homeless.

Previously, the Catholic Worker House sheltered homeless families onsite, but that was discontinued after 2010, when Haven for Hope opened on the opposite end of downtown, according to Dr. Chris Plauche, a retired pediatrician and the nonprofit agency’s volunteer director.

The agency soon may return to its housing roots, however. Plauche announced Sunday that Catholic Worker House is partnering with the Housing First Communities Coalition as part of an effort to build 150 units to help the chronically homeless. It will work with city agencies and other groups; for example, architecture students at the University of Texas at San Antonio will be designing small housing units.

In the meantime, the Catholic Worker House continues to provide three meals a day for its clients, Monday-Thursday, when it’s open 7 a.m.-7 p.m. On Fridays, it’s open 8 a.m.-1 p.m. with breakfast and lunch offered. Volunteers estimate the agency serves about 500 meals a day.

During its hours of service, the agency provides free WiFi, a place to do laundry, watch a movie, receive mail, make and receive phone calls and emails and more — a safe place to rest in a home environment

It’s usually closed on Saturdays and Sundays, but Sunday was a special day, with volunteers pitching in to serve a Christmas Eve brunch.

“This is a good place to be on Christmas Eve,” said Jerry Diaz, 21.

It’s a bright spot, “so you’re not feeling lonely,” added Ted Rodriguez, 56.

“It’s a blessing that the father comes here and that the Catholic Worker House is here,” said Thomas Blinco, 48. “We’re a tight-knit group and we care about each other.”

“I personally think, being out here, you’ve got something to believe in,” Blinco added. “It lets us know we aren’t forgotten, that we’re people, too. It gives us hope.”