

Gospel Roads – Tampa, Fla.

Fr. Abraham Feliciano, SDB

"I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another. This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:34-35)

From Saturday, June 20 to Sunday, June 28, 22 young people from Florida, Louisiana, New Jersey, New York, and Texas gathered at Mary Help of Christians Center in Tampa to take up the challenge to love like Christ and grow as his disciples. The Gospel Roads-Tampa experience, organized and directed by the capable leadership of St. Petersburg Catholic alumnus and former candidate Tommy Wilson, was rich in all the fundamental facets of Christian life: community, prayer, service and witness. Serving with Tommy was a leadership team comprised of eight adults also from geographically diverse areas: Salesian High alumnus Ralph Alvarez ('08); St. Petersburg alumnus and former candidate Jeff Banks ('06); Fr. Abraham Feliciano, SDB (D.C.); Jennifer Hoeffner (N.Y.); Mary Help of Christians Academy senior Bridgette Kennedy; and three other alumni from St. Petersburg Catholic – Andy Kline ('08), Patrick Nunes ('07), and Ana Schirripa ('09).

All but seven of the GR participants hailed from Salesian works. Those seven young men, who are from Plainfield, N.J., received a warm welcome to Don Bosco and the Salesian Family and left with the spark of Don Bosco's spirit having been ignited in each of them. Early on, one of them asked, "How can I become of a part of this Salesian thing? I want to learn more about Don Bosco." Clearly, Don Bosco's hold on the hearts of the young is as strong as ever!

Despite coming from such diverse locations and varied stages of growth and education, the GR I participants took quickly to the task of forming a solid and faith-filled Christian and Salesian community. The normal first-day jitters and youthful anxieties swiftly melted into a genuine and firm sense of Salesian family spirit and authentic concern for one another. Each day began with the celebration of the Eucharist and ended with night prayer, the customary three Hail Mary's and the traditional Salesian Good Night. ►

Other key prayer moments included a penance service with Confession, Eucharistic adoration, the Rosary, and several evening services organized by the participants themselves (the highlight of which was sunset prayer service on the beach!). The social activities and meal times were warm and bona fide personal exchanges that helped form bonds of friendship that last well beyond the nine days spent together.

The service/ministerial experiences were wide-ranging and exceptional. While the base was at Mary Help of Christians, the group traveled throughout the Tampa/St. Petersburg area to find Jesus in the needy. They prepared two large meals for the homeless: one for Pinellas Hope (a large outreach program of the St. Petersburg Diocese) and the other for St. Francis of Assisi Church. In both instances they not only prepared the meals, but also served them and spent time eating and talking with the homeless people. They were just as moved by the life-stories that were disclosed to them as the homeless people were touched by the authenticity and warmth of the young people.



(L-R) Reyvon (Miami), Alex (Plainfield, N.J.), Kelly (St. Petersburg), and Ralph (New York)

On Tuesday and Friday, they spent the entire day at Metropolitan Ministries, an outreach center that provides food, clothing, education, health-care and housing services (to name a few) to the extremely disadvantaged of the area. They were rotated in shifts throughout the different branches of the complex, thus providing them with the opportunity to have direct contact with the beneficiaries as well as to do some of the "behind the scenes" work. They took people food shopping, worked in a daycare center, sorted food and clothing, restocked warehouses, and even helped improve the physical plant of the center. The work, long and laborious, helped everyone see a bit more clearly how great the challenge is to meet the needs of the most disadvantaged. ►

The highlight for many of the young people was the full day they spent at the Mary Help of Christians Day Camp. Although they assisted at the camp throughout the week, on Thursday they actually helped run activities, games and events that they had created and prepared the previous day. While all their activities were successful, the homemade 100-foot Slip and Slide seemed to be the biggest draw. Yet, the most inspiring moment of their work that day was the prayer and faith formation time in the beautiful chapel that they organized with dynamic songs and several skits on the life of Don Bosco.

What was so impressive and enriching about the entire day was that the GR youth were not simply add-ons to the camp. They became a legitimate part of the camp experience for the campers, knowing the campers by name and being known by them by name. In true Salesian tradition, they had formed healthy and caring relationships with the young whom they were serving.

On the last full day of their experience, the young people took up the challenge to be public witnesses and champions for the culture of life. Joining an ecumenical prayer movement, the group went to downtown St. Petersburg to pray in front of a newly opened Planned Parenthood Clinic to pray for an end to abortion. After a series of prayers, talks, and hymns, the group led the recitation of the Rosary and, upon returning to Mary Help, celebrated a Mass for an end to abortion.

Through their various icebreakers, social activities and prayer, the GR participants loved each other and experienced genuine Christian community. Through their numerous and stirring prayer moments, they strengthened their relationship and communion with God. Through their efforts at the homeless shelters, Metropolitan Ministries, Mary Help of Christians Day Camp, and the abortion clinic, they served Jesus in the needy, as well as gave public witness to their faith in the Risen Christ. Through their devotion to Mary and to Don Bosco, they showed themselves to be sons and daughters of St. John Bosco. And, through it all they showed themselves to be true disciples of the Lord Jesus by the love that they showed to each other and to those in need.

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