

News

# Replica of Vatican art transforms Socorro Mission

*Michaelangelo's La Pietà unveiled in Socorro in January*

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SOCORRO, Texas - Ash Wednesday marked the start of the Lenten season for Christians in El Paso and around the world.

It is a fitting time to visit La Purisima, the Catholic mission in Socorro -- where those devoted to the Church and art have been paying homage to a replica of artwork depicting Jesus Christ after his crucifixion.

The original Pieta, finished by artist Michelangelo in 1499, can be found in St. Peter's Basilica, Vatican City. While the marble sculpture is closely guarded and sits behind glass, the Vatican-authorized replica in La Purisima is unobstructed, save for a makeshift rope barricade draped around the pedestal.

The sculpture's sheer presence has transformed the mission, said Magda Maureira, a volunteer with the church.

"It means a whole new chapter for our community, for our valley, even for our city," she said. "She is one of a kind and we happen to be privileged to receive that gift."

Maureira called the arrival of Pieta a landmark moment for the town, which is southeast of El Paso, as well as the mission, which was established by the Spanish in 1683. It is a registered Texas historic landmark and one of three missions on the historic Mission Trail that is still operating.

"We haven't been hospitable to tourists. Our (visiting) hours were short and the mission was often closed," she added.

Maureira said shortly before the church learned of the donation, the church had revamped its approach to guest relations by expanding the visiting hours in the mission and the gift shop. The statue arrived about two weeks after the transformation.

"Little did we know how the hand of God works here. We are now seeing hundreds of people any given day," Maureira told ABC-7.

The tale of prosperity thrilled Richard Stewart.

"That's what I was hoping it would do. That's my goal," said Stewart in a phone interview from California, where he now lives with his wife, Socorro native Esther Fresquez Stewart.

The couple donated the Pieta to the mission.

"This is for those who will never go to the Vatican. They can see the Pieta in their community," he added.

The Stewarts met in Socorro and married in 1969.

Esther told ABC-7 how her parents were thoroughly involved in the community of La Purisima, and would participate annually in the Stations of the Cross. Her father would portray Jesus, and would often return home dirty with cuts and blood on his face. Their lesson of involving God in their marriage didn't hit home until more than 30 years later, when Esther and

Richard were close to divorcing.

It was a lesson for which both were grateful and wanted to show their appreciation.

"(Donating the Pieta is) in tribute to my parents and the area of Socorro, and the people and the community of Socorro," Esther said.

This is the second replica that has been paid for by the Stewarts at a cost of more than \$300,000 each.

The first one is in Bishop Alemany High School in Mission Hills, California.

The replica in La Purisima was unveiled during a ceremony on January 24.

"I truly believe these are pieces of love and energy and if we can place one there in (La Purisima), it's a miracle for that church. That's what I believe," said Richard.

Lent is the holiest season on the Christian calendar -- a time where the faithful practice love and forgiveness. It's those values that those who've been touched by the Pieta believe it embodies.

"There's the Virgin Mary sitting there with (the body of) Christ ... But she is not bitter," said Esther, adding, "I think she shows us to forgive."

Maureira agreed, and added, "It's a challenge to our faith. It's a very powerful symbol and I think gazing upon her takes you many, many places."

It can take visitors places without leaving the borderland.

Only 112 replicas can be made from the authorized mold, and the Stewarts are funding the creation of 11 of them.

They are working on installing one in a church in Richard's hometown of Rome, NY, and in the papal summer home.

Those will likely be installed in April.