

Replica of Michelangelo sculpture Given to La Purisima parish in Socorro

By Maria Cortes Gonzalez / El Paso Times

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A replica of a world-famous Michelangelo sculpture that is inside St. Peter's Basilica in Vatican City is now at La Purisima parish in Socorro.

The replica of the Pietà — which translates to "pity or compassion" — was made from the original mold of the Vatican artwork, the only piece Michelangelo signed.

The sculpture depicts Mary holding Jesus after the crucifixion.

It is a gift to the Socorro parish by Richard and Esther Stewart, who grew up in Socorro. They donated it in honor of Esther Stewart's parents, Santiago Fresquez and Cecilia Candelaria.

Her late parents were faithful and active parishioners of La Purisima, which includes the Socorro Mission, from 1935 through 1993.

"This is in dedication to my mom and dad. They were very active in this community and this is their love story — between them, their God and their church," said Esther Stewart, one of 11 children.

Bishop Mark J. Seitz will celebrate a Mass of Thanksgiving for the Pietà at 4 p.m. today at La Purisima Catholic Church, 328 S. Nevarez.

The marble replica, valued at \$330,000, is one of 112 Vatican-authorized castings that are being funded by the Stewarts. The couple is donating 11 of them to different churches around the country and are still considering locations. The first one was placed in Bishop Alemany High School in Mission Hills, Calif., in December.

The Stewarts, who live in California, said the replica is a fitting tribute and symbol of love, which they had to learn anew in 2003 when they were ready to divorce.

"We went to Retrouvaille, which is a Catholic ministry for hurting couples, and guess what they told us: 'to put Christ in your marriage.' And we were like, 'That's what my parents were trying to teach us. It was like we finally got it and were able to resurrect our marriage,'" Esther Stewart said.

Richard Stewart said, "Even though we are paying for it, it's a gift from them — saying Santiago and Cecilia continue to bless this community — because this would have never happened if they didn't do what they did."

Esther Stewart always remembers how her father played Christ in the Passion Play for the church.

"My mother would dress him as Christ and he would make a crown of thorns and leave one thorn. And he would go around the cemetery and do all the stations of the cross. And when he would get back, he would have blood actually coming down his face and he would be tired and dusty. That just made a big impact on me," she said.

She added, "At the end of the Passion Play, my mother would sing in Spanish, 'que culpa tuvo mi hijo para morir asi (what fault did my son have to die like this),' and that is what the Pietà represents, that love."

Richard Stewart, chief executive officer of Help Worldwide, a humanitarian organization, said each piece is a beacon of love.

"It will make this church a strategic location in the planet for people who want to come and see this piece. So many people will never go to the Vatican to see the uniqueness but the Holy Spirit is in this piece as the one in the Vatican," he said.

David Newren, president of Arte Divine of California, which is creating the replica sculptures, said it was an honor to be picked for this project.

"Other artists have done their own interpretation or tried to copy Michelangelo to a greater or a lesser degree, but everything you see here was done in his own hand because this is the mold from the original sculpture. When I got this opportunity to work on this sculpture which touches people with its beauty and inspiration — and is in fact the embodiment of Christian faith — it's more than just a pleasure, it's an honor to be a part of this," Newren said.

The Rev. Angel Maldonado, church rector, said he thinks it's incredible that the Pietà is in his church and that it is a great reminder of what religion should be about.

"The fundamental message of religion is love. But people don't understand that and think religion is about asking God for things. Simply put, we receive something every day — so what is Sunday — a day of thanks for our health, for life, etc. We should recognize that someone is doing something for us and we must give thanks."

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