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Priest Prepares for Painful Farewell from L.A. Barrio

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The patron saint of Eastside gangs is bidding a bittersweet farewell to the barrio to which he dreamed of bringing peace.

Six years ago, wide-eyed and idealistic, Father Gregory J. Boyle strode into the chapel of Dolores Mission Church: the youngest pastor—at the poorest parish—in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. His strategy for quelling the gangs in his flock was to “love them into submission.”

Since then, he has become the *padre* that most of the homeboys never had, finding them jobs, giving them hugs, cutting their hair and wiping their tears. On many occasions, his paternalism has also left him humbled and heartbroken—26 times he has had to bury a young victim of the escalating violence he sought to halt.

Next Sunday, he will celebrate his final Mass before embarking on a yearlong spiritual retreat required of all Jesuits. Although Boyle worries about abandoning the young men whose lives he has uplifted, he concedes that it is a necessary respite from the anguish of caring for young men whose lives are cut short.

“I’m right at the edge of burnout, and at this point, if I do another year here I think I’ll go over the edge,” said Boyle, 38, noting that his tenure as pastor has left him balder, grayer and pudgier. “Before, each death pinched me; it was a pain that would hurt and then go away. The last couple deaths got into the marrow of my bones.”

Boyle has asked to be returned to Dolores Mission next summer, though it would be as a community worker and not as head of the parish. His superiors at the California Province of the Society of Jesus, which teaches that Jesuits should be ready to ship out to wherever they are most needed, have made no promises.

It is a time of intense personal conflict for Boyle, the celebrity gang priest, who has been forced to discover his very human limits.

In recent weeks, he has been feted with a string of emotional send-offs featuring barbecued Mexican food and mariachis. Yet, in more private moments, young gang

members have approached him in tears, asking why he must leave them, wondering if he will return to bury them if and when they are killed.

“It’s extraordinarily painful for me,” Boyle said. “I’ve already told myself to be prepared for the most difficult year of my life.”

This is a man exalted for his capacity to unconditionally love youths who have been denied love under almost any condition. He is painted larger than life on a neighborhood mural surrounded by the images of Martin Luther King Jr. and the Virgin of Guadalupe. But he has also been profoundly saddened that his love could not stem the barrio’s tide of bloodshed. Instead, gang homicides in the community have more than doubled since he buried his first gang member.

“There was a time when he really believed he could make peace in the barrio, where there would be an ‘explosion of peace,’ to use his words in the past,” said writer Celeste Fremon, who is working on a book and movie about Boyle. “I think he’s had to become a realist and transform his expectations.

“Greg is the real thing,” she added. “He really loves these kids as a parent would a child . . . but it’s not without great sorrow and complexity and confusion and conflict.”

The turmoil is at least as great for members of the eight gangs that operate in the Pico Gardens and Aliso Village housing projects, a two-square-mile complex east of the Los Angeles River.

The gangsters fear that long-simmering rivalries could explode in the absence of the man they call “G-Dog.” He is the force, they say, that maintains whatever semblance of peace there may be, the glue that keeps the barrio from sliding into chaos.

“When he’s gone, I can’t even say how it’s gonna be,” said Dreamer, 21, a member of Cuatro Flats who always seems to find an excuse to snare Boyle in an affectionate bearhug.

“It’s really kind of messed up,” said Spanky, 22. “Between now and a year, anything could happen.”

One of Boyle’s most potent tools for keeping a lid on the violence is also in jeopardy. “Jobs,” he is fond of saying, “stop bullets.”

Right now, he has 63 hard-core gang members on his payroll, making \$5 to \$6 an hour painting over graffiti, helping build a day-care center, maintaining the church grounds and doing any odd task Boyle can invent so as to not leave them idle.

The money comes in the form of donations, sometimes anonymous, that seem to miraculously arrive in the mail just as the bank calls to remind Boyle his account is overdrawn. It is, in many ways, a testament to the force of his personality. After he

appeared on a recent “60 Minutes,” he said, the checks that poured in kept the homies employed for two months.

“We’re losing something of tremendous value,” said Breavon (Bebée) McDuffie, president of the Pico Gardens Residents Advisory Council. “Ain’t nobody else in the same mold as G., not even the Pope.”

It is a mission to which Boyle says he has dedicated his life. This son of a middle-class Hancock Park family, owners of a dairy that Boyle’s great-grandfather founded in 1913, hopes to grow old and die with his friends from the Clarence Street Locos, The Mob Crew, Cuatro Flats and the East L.A. Dukes.

“Whenever I come back after being gone for one day or three days or a week, when I get off the 101 Freeway at 1st Street, my heart leaps with joy,” he said. “I don’t want that to ever change.”

Before he can make that trip again, he must embark on a spiritual journey, known as the tertianship, which is required of all Jesuits before taking their final vows. In August, he will leave on a 30-day silent retreat to Michigan, then spend several months working with the poor, probably in a Latin American country. When he comes back, his superiors will consider whether to return him to Dolores Mission—a reasonable probability, they say, but far from a guarantee.

“This is basically an opportunity to withdraw and look at your life and what you’re doing,” said Father Richard McCurdy, executive assistant at the Jesuit headquarters in Los Gatos. “Particularly for a guy like Greg, who is always so busy, it’s just a chance to be able to pray quietly. Who knows where his head is going to be at the end of that?”

In his place, the parish will be headed by Father Peter Neeley, Dolores Mission’s associate pastor. Neeley is on vacation until the end of the month and could not be reached for comment, but it is widely agreed that his calling is not with the neighborhood’s cholos, who say he is a dedicated priest but has never embraced them with the same warmth as Boyle.

But, then, there is only one G-Dog. His cramped office is decorated with graffiti-style renditions of the Dolores Mission logo and sketches by the gangsters in which Boyle appears with a crucifix earring and teardrop tattoo. On one wall, there is an oil painting by Chaka, the infamous tagger, and on a shelf, there is a quart bottle of So-Safe Graffiti Remover.

Dressed in black tennis shoes, weathered slacks and a striped short-sleeve shirt, Boyle strolls the projects with an ease that comes from having shared intimately in the pride and pain of his flock. He greets the elderly in formal, grammatically perfect Spanish, while peppering his talks to the homeboys with the salty Spanglish of the streets.

He tries to downplay his departure, assuring everybody that his absence will be temporary. He will write, he will call, he will pray, he says, hoping to quash any feelings of abandonment among the many gang members who know all too well what it is like to have a father leave.

Still, he concedes that he may be fooling himself. Already, he is feeling pangs of guilt over the day when the phone rings with news that one of the homeboys has been killed—and Boyle will not be able to come back to bury him.

“That will be torture for me,” he said. “But that’s part of life here.”