

French mission of care in the Bronx

By Paul Sanchez

FOR the Bronx, or for any neighbourhood in the United States for that matter, the sight of French missionaries walking through the streets everyday praying the Rosary is definitely unusual.

Since opening their mission in 2003, the community of Heart's Home USA (www.heartshome-usa.org) has served a poor area in the South Bronx, in conjunction with the parish of St Francis of Assisi.

The Bronx mission is part of the worldwide Heart's Home network, an international Catholic volunteer programme with 35 apostolate communities in 20 countries.

Founded in 1990 by Fr Thierry de Roucy, a French priest, Heart's Home has trained more than 1,000 volunteers, mostly from France, but also from Latin America, Asia and other Euro-

pean countries.

Fr de Roucy created Heart's Home to help the most suffering people in the world. Some of the 20 countries with Heart's Home missions are Thailand, Italy, Argentina, Peru, El Salvador, Philippines, France, Ukraine and Honduras.

The Heart's Home USA community consists of three nuns, two candidates for the priesthood, and six lay volunteers who have committed at least 14 months of their lives to serving the poor in a spirit of compassion.

The presence of French missionaries in the South Bronx, an area known for crime and urban decay, has definitely been noticed.

St Francis of Assisi parish was once an Irish stronghold and now serves Hispanic parishioners from a multitude of countries, mainly Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic.

Laura McDonough, who left the neighbourhood in the late 1960s, said of the French mis-

sionaries of Heart's Home: "It is heartening for me to know that my old parish is unique in that the Spanish-speaking immigrants there are now being served by immigrant missionaries from France.

"After all, many decades ago the Irish of the parish were immigrants, too."

Lourdes Renero Alvarez, a resident of the area who is not affiliated with the parish, added: "Everybody in the neighbourhood knows they are there. We see them walking the streets saying the Rosary all the time. We know they are there to help whether people are Catholic or not."

Parish

The ministries performed by the Heart's Home community are diverse, and community members help the parish in many ways.

For instance, Sr Regine and Sr Albane teach Confraternity of Christian Doctrine to parish chil-

Caring: Heart's Home volunteer Agnes Bureau with an AIDS patient at a hospice



dren and are leading the class preparing for First Communion.

Also, the community helps in the organising of special dinners in the parish hall for parishioners in need.

Heart's Home assists Spanish-speaking parishioners in applying for food stamps and disability benefits. Members visit both people in the parish and neighbourhood, such as the elderly and disabled, many of whom have little contact with the outside world.

They also regularly visit AIDS and cancer patients. Regla Garcia, a senior citizen who came to the Bronx from the Dominican Republic more than 20 years

ago, enjoys her regular visits from members of the Heart's Home USA community.

"They are helping people like me who don't speak English and establishing caring friendships. I wish more of these French people would come to the Bronx."

Life

Laetitia Palluat, a community member who has a degree in marketing in France prior to making the commitment to Heart's Home, has found the experience has drastically changed her life.

She said: "Because I am sure

that through the community life, the prayer life and the life with the poor, you will discover Christ, and learn a lot about yourself."

All community members agree that their daily Mass, holy hour and the prayer of the Church prepare them to serve the poorest and most suffering. Their daily recitation of the Rosary in the streets of the Bronx is in sync with the other 35 Heart's Home volunteer communities serving the poor throughout the world which also walk their respective neighbourhood streets saying the Rosary.

■ Heart's Home USA can be reached at www.heartshome-usa.org.