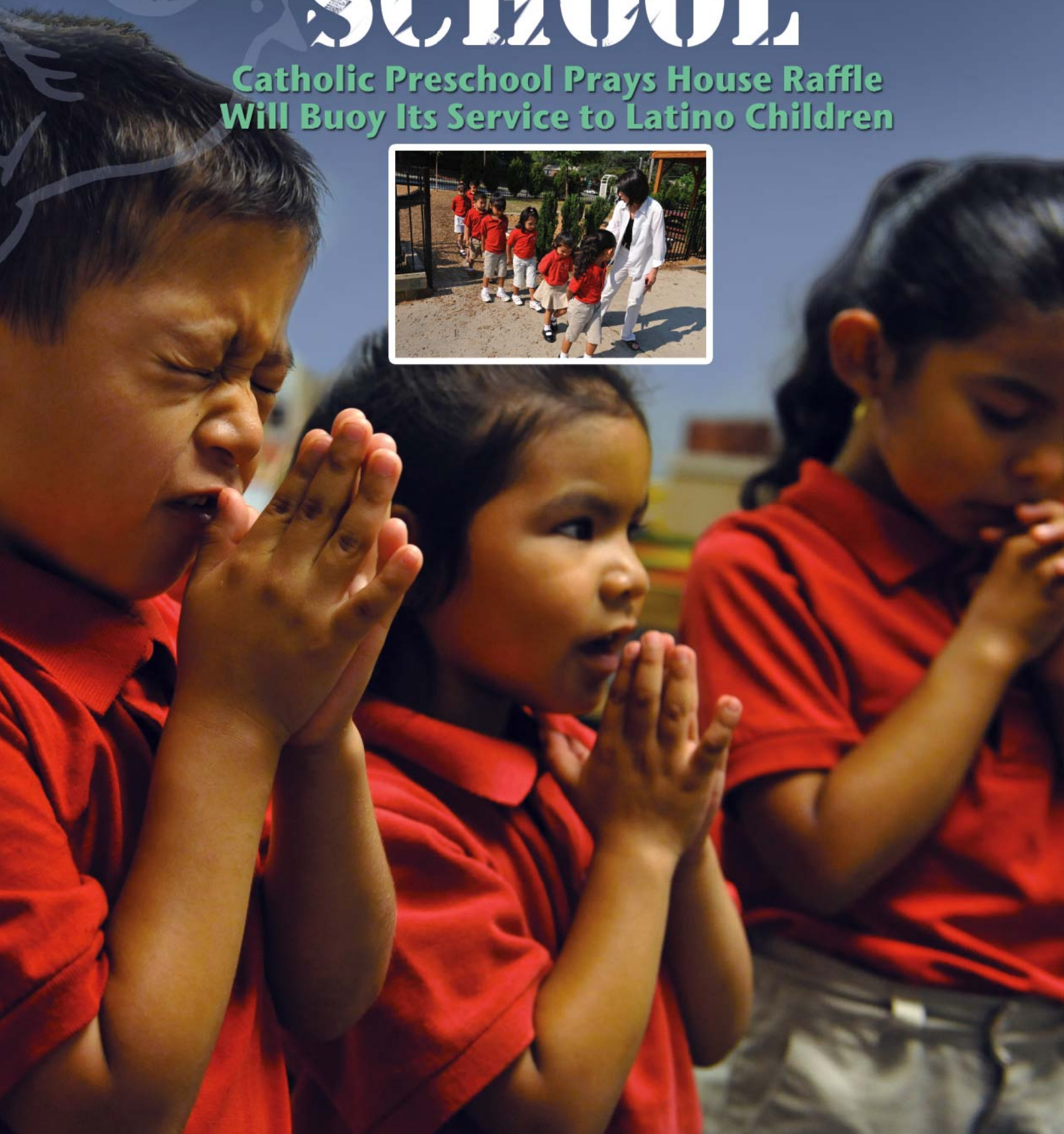


SOLIDARITY SCHOOL

By Robert Mims

Catholic Preschool Prays House Raffle Will Buoy Its Service to Latino Children



Jamie Arthur needs to look no further than into the faces of the 65 Latino preschoolers at her Sandy Springs, Georgia Solidarity School to feel the impact of the receding economy up close and personal. These children's parents—most of them landscapers, painters and day-laborers who live on the economy's bubble—have never been able to pay more than a fraction of what it costs to teach their 3, 4 and 5-year-olds English and other skills needed to successfully enter kindergarten.

Charitable contributions have always been the mainstay for the school's \$500,000 a year budget, but with the recession in full, dismal bloom, Jamie, head of the preschool in suburban Atlanta, estimates donations have dipped 50 percent. Hoping to survive, Solidarity has made contingency plans to cut enrollment to just 33 youngsters next year, along with slashing its current staff of 13 to just three.

"If we can't recoup some of the operating expenses for next year, we will be forced to cut the size of the school and its staff drastically," Jamie says, noting that in addition to the 65 children (all US citizens) currently enrolled, there is a waiting list of 70 more.

An Awesome Opportunity

Hope for Solidarity's future manifested itself recently when builder Robert Beecham entered the picture. Robert owns a vacant, \$600,000, three-bedroom home in the middle of a scenic vineyard in the north Georgia mountains of Dahlonega. A deal was struck to give that house to Solidarity at cost for a fundraising raffle, with all profits going to the school.

"We need to sell 13,500 tickets at \$50 each for Rob to break even," Jamie says. "If we don't reach that goal, we will refund the tickets. Of course, we hope for a lot more sales than that."

Solidarity and its supporters are praying the raffle will raise at least \$500,000 for the school's dwindling operations fund. Meanwhile, the winner will not only get a new home in a beautiful setting, but also \$100,000 in cash.

Jamie's dream is for a raffle that draws beyond initial hopes. For example, a \$1 million effort would not only allow Solidarity to maintain its staffing and enrollment, but perhaps to expand to its licensed capacity of 100 students.

Serving Needy Children

Serving a predominantly poor Latino community where English is not spoken in many homes, Solidarity is the best chance many children will have to enter kindergarten prepared to succeed. In addition to an education and activities stressing Christian principles, the school teaches English by immersion, considered one of the most effective means for learning language.

With the aid of bilingual teachers and volunteers, English is introduced to the students incrementally. Teachers also reinforce pride in the Spanish language

are in space shared with the Holy Spirit Catholic Center at 120 Northwood Drive.

"As Christians, we see each child here as having dignity," Jamie says. "When you serve children from very low social and economic conditions, you are, as scripture encourages, 'doing unto one of the least of these my brethren.' The reward for us is seeing these children with the stability of the classroom, a challenging curriculum, nurturing teachers and the balanced meals we provide for them each day. These are babies—3, 4 -and 5-year-olds. Our goal is to provide this experience to as many children as possible."



and culture. Music, art, personal and social skills, as well as proper nutrition are other priorities.

"By the time they leave us, they can go into the public school system's kindergartens with two to three years of a proper foundation in academics and social skills, as well as totally comprehending and speaking—and in some cases even reading and writing—English," Jamie says. "In past years, some of our students have even gotten scholarships to private [kindergartens]."

The Solidarity School—an offshoot of local Catholic parish services to the largely immigrant Sandy Springs community—was founded in 2001 in a trailer with 12 children. It, however, is organizationally—and fiscally— independent of the Catholic Church, and as a 501-3C non-profit entity, dependent upon contributions. Today, its facilities

Long Term Success

Long-term, success for Solidarity School would be to encourage similar programs in other immigrant communities in the greater Atlanta area, the state and even the nation at large. "This school could be a model for many areas right here in Georgia where Latinos, Vietnamese, European and other non-English speaking families have settled," Jamie says.

A Labor Day drawing is planned to pick the raffle winner, but Jamie hopes it will be Solidarity and its youngsters who end up the biggest beneficiaries.

To learn more about Solidarity School or to enter the lottery online, visit the web site at <http://www.solidarityschool.org>. For raffle-related questions, please call the school at 404-236-0868.