

Ruben Brigantty's gift

By Suzanne Elsesser
NC News Service

It's a dream come true for Ruben Brigantty when he steps in front of the weekly class on Scripture at the South Bronx Pastoral Center in New York City. All his life he has wanted to teach.

Starting the class with prayer and a quiz on last week's lecture, Brigantty gently encourages his students in their native Spanish. He knows what it is like for adults to come to class after a full day's work in a factory or at home in a too-small apartment with young children.

For Brigantty too is a factory worker. Each day he carpools to a plant outside of the city. He works on an assembly line, adding mirrors, door handles and trim to cars as they come through his department.

"I never had the opportunity to go to college in Puerto Rico," he explains. "And so when I was asked to teach it was a surprise, a challenge and I said, 'Why not?'"

Brigantty was invited to teach by the pastoral center staff several years ago after he had completed four years of rigorous study at the center.

Sister of Charity Nora Cunningham, who helped train him, gets an additional sparkle in her eyes when she talks about Brigantty's quiet enthusiasm, his gentleness and ability to relate to people. She says that he "represents the potential that is dormant in a lot of people."

serious fast and God did not seem to notice:

"Is this the manner of fasting I wish, of keeping a day of penance, that a man should bow his head like a reed, and lie in sackcloth and ashes? Do you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?"

"This, rather, is the fasting that I wish: releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke, setting free the oppressed, breaking every yoke; sharing your bread with the hungry, sheltering the oppressed and the homeless; clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning your back on your own."

"Then your light shall break forth like the dawn" (Isaiah 58:5-8a)

(Father Castelot teaches at St. John's Seminary, Plymouth, Mich.)

"The richness of the South Bronx is in its people," Sister Cunningham states. "It has people with potential — and a lot of priests and other ministers who believe in people."

Lent. This is a time when the whole church turns attention to Christian growth — to change, "conversion." And often the way people grow is by tapping their potential, either as individuals or as communities.

That means, I think, that:
• People need to be open to the idea that their full potential as human beings hasn't yet been unlocked; they need to be open to the possibility of growth and change in their own lives;

• And, people need to take responsibility for encouraging others to recognize their own potential and use it to the fullest.

Belief in people is the underlying purpose of a group in New York's South Bronx called People for Change. This group published a pamphlet in 1984 called "People Power."

Illustrated in comic-book style, the pamphlet shows a woman standing in front of a six-story building decked out with many rooftop TV antennas and a filled laundry line stretching to the next building.

The woman is saying: "Take our building, for instance. It looks pretty good now but last winter we had no heat."

A man answers: "We had to organize. I learned a lot from that. Together we can change things."

The main character responds: "We had to stop ignoring each other. We had to start dealing with each other, sharing the problem affecting us all." She adds, "Our unity gave us power with the city and the landlord."

People for Change offers that kind of training, the kind that helps people to understand their own potential.

Our potential, whether as individuals or as communities is a gift from God. But it's not given for the sake of our own narrow interests.

Ruben Brigantty was fortunate. He dreamed of being a teacher. When his talent was recognized by others and after he was trained, the dream became reality.

And Brigantty enjoys teaching. But through him God is reaching a lot of people.

Ruben's gift is a gift for all.

(Ms. Elsesser is on the staff of the South Bronx Pastoral Center in New York City.)

FOOD...

...for thought

An old friend calls you up one day, wants to talk. He's chosen an inconvenient time to reappear on the scene. And you approach the meeting with some trepidation, suspecting your friend's story won't be pretty.

But the friend wants a chance to tell his story — one that, indeed, proves to be a story of sadness, loneliness — a series of personal crises. Now the friend has sought help; is trying to change his life's course.

You listen to his story. You try to understand. You know that this friend doesn't seek much from you except your compassion and your hope.

And you wonder: Is this one of the people Pope John Paul II had in mind when he spoke recently of solidarity with the world's poor. "We affirm our solidarity with all the poor of the modern world, in the tragically concrete and daily reality of their sufferings," was the way he put it. And he went on to name the poor people of the modern world:

• "The unemployed waiting for work that will enable them to earn an honest living" and to contribute to the building up of society.

• "Those who, through

sickness, old age or misfortune, are tasting the bitter cup of solitude and abandonment."

• "Those struggling to escape from the toils of drugs, violence, criminal organizations."

• "Those excluded by reason of their nationality or race from equal dignity" with others in their own land.

• "Refugees who find themselves, forcibly, far from their homelands and...are very often living in conditions unworthy of human beings."

And that is only part of the pope's list of those who suffer poverty in the broadest sense of the term. He named numerous others, victims of war and terrorism, for example, and those deprived of human and religious freedoms.

How will you observe the season of Lent? Will you fast? Will you give alms?

The book of Isaiah had something to say about fasting. It linked fasting directly to efforts that would release those bound unjustly, that would free and shelter the oppressed, that would feed the hungry. Fasting, it was written there, means "not turning your back on your own."

Who is poor? What might you offer the poor this Lent?

...for discussion

1. That word "conversion": What does it really mean? After reading Father David K. O'Rourke's article about his friend Pat's conversion, can you point to a turning point in your own life? Was it a conversion? How? What changed for you?

2. What does Lent have to do with your own hidden potential? After reading Suzanne Elsesser's article, do you see any specific way you might grow or expand your potential during Lent?

3. Almsgiving, it is suggested in the article by Katharine Bird, can mean more than the gift of money. It can mean making a gift of your time, for example. How might you "give" — how might you practice almsgiving — during Lent?

4. There's more to fasting than meets the eye, Father John Castelot suggests. What is the definition of fasting he finds in Scripture?

SECOND HELPINGS

Lawrence Cunningham's new book, "The Catholic Heritage," explores the history of Christianity as it is reflected in martyrs and pilgrims, in mystics, theologians, artists, activists and saints. The ways these people, at different points in time, "attempted with faltering steps to imitate" Christ are the writer's focus, along with the manner in which heroes and saints of the past can serve as "models for the present." Cunningham is a Florida State University professor. He writes: "I would like to communicate to sympathetic readers my own profound respect for the tradition which is behind, under, and, in a real sense, 'in front of' our current Catholic experience. I would like that hypothetical reader to understand, for example, that the Franciscan spirit is not a relic of a past age but a very real way of being for those who, like the Catholic Workers, daily serve the most battered and afflicted of our society." (Crossroad Publishing, 575 Lexington Ave., New York, N.Y. 10022. Hardback, \$14.95.)