

Pope to get 'official papal skateboard' from youths

NEW YORK – When Pope Benedict XVI returns to the Vatican, he'll be toting a gift not generally associated with an 81-year-old pontiff. He'll take home the "official papal skateboard," a gift from the youths of New York.

The gift and a contest to design it started with a remark made by a teen member of the skateboard club at St. Elizabeth Parish in Washington Heights, a hilly neighborhood in northern Manhattan.

Father Peter Pomposello is a skateboarder and the parochial vicar at St. Elizabeth. As he recalled it, he was talking about the papal visit with the club members and they began to ask him questions about why the pope was coming and what he would do in New York.

"I said, 'We pray with him and we give him gifts,'" he said, "and one kid, without missing a beat, said, 'Let's give him a skateboard!'"

Father Pomposello agreed, to the surprise of the boarders. But he sees it as a vehicle for evangelization. "It's no secret that skateboard culture does not have a clean image," he said in an interview. "In their age of cell phones and iPods, this is meeting the kids where they're at."

The pope will be in New York April 18-20; he will be in Washington April 15-17.

Father Pomposello secured the necessary permissions and began to advertise online a contest to design the underside of the skateboard. It was open to youth ages 11 to 18 who live in the Archdiocese of New York. The rules limited the colors to papal gold, black, red and white and encouraged the use of symbols such as the papal visit logo and the visit's motto, "Christ Our Hope."

Some 76 eligible entries were received; the deadline was March 17. Father Pomposello said that he had to decline entries from Europe and U.S. cities beyond the Archdiocese of New York, "because this is meant to be a gift from the children of

New York.”

Father Pomposello hoped the winner would be announced April 6; entries were being judged on the basis of creativity and originality. The winner will get three tickets to the papal youth rally April 19 at St. Joseph Seminary in Yonkers.

The actual gift will be fabricated by an online skateboard store. Father Pomposello said that replicas of the winning papal skateboard would be available for sale, with the proceeds donated to Catholic Charities.

Father Pomposello is a former teacher whose athletic interests also include running marathons, bicycling and snowboarding. He was ordained in 2004.

His skateboard club draws up to 12 youths each Saturday throughout the year. In the winter, they board in the parish gym, where they set up ramps and rails. Other times, they are outdoors in neighborhood parks and in parks with facilities for skateboarding.

Father Pomposello especially enjoys riding his longboard – a longer skateboard than the average 28- to 33-inch board – through the streets of Washington Heights early on Saturday mornings. His current favorite board is decorated in shades of blue, with a photo of a breaking wave. In the center of the wave is a graphic urging, “Protect the Unborn.”

Omar Sanchez, a 15-year-old member of the skateboard club, said that he’ll be at St. Joseph’s to see the pope receive the skateboard. He said that he didn’t enter the design contest, but he thinks it’s a great idea. Asked to predict the pope’s reaction, Oscar said, “I think he’ll be surprised and happy to receive a gift like this. I don’t think he ever had one. I hope he likes it.”

There are no plans to demonstrate the gift, but it should be noted that St. Joseph’s is located on top of a rad hill.

Pictures of the entries can be found online at www.archnny.org/papalvisit/papal-skateboard-art-design-contest at the site’s “View Art Gallery” link on the lower right-hand side. A photo of the eventual winner will be posted there.