

Catholic academy opens in Hamden

By Ann DeMatteo

But for the 30 fifth-graders who are the first students of St. Martin de Porres Academy, Tuesday was the start of class work.

Sixteen boys and 14 girls from Hamden and New Haven started school at 7:25 a.m. with a welcome from school administrators and supporters.

They prayed, recited the school's honor code, then went to their classrooms to start what will be the first of their academic years under the tutelage and guidance of New Haven-area businesspeople who had a dream.

The dream started about 10 years ago when people like John J. Crawford and Jay Bowes started to volunteer at Sacred Heart/St. Peter School in New Haven.

They formed a private foundation, The Acorn Fund, then asked for permission from the Archdiocese of Hartford to run an independent Roman Catholic school. The fund is now called the Connecticut Urban Education Fund.

This year's budget is \$650,000, but as more grades are added, the budget will be \$1 million. The school is tuition-free. The school ultimately will have grades 5 to 8, and students will be guided to attend college-preparatory high schools and watched over through college.

"It's a long-term visionary approach to long-term development," said Bowes, who is now president of the school.

St. Martin de Porres Academy, named after a saint known for his unconditional love of the poor, is the first Catholic school to open in the New Haven area since 1957. The academy is leasing space in the St.

Ann's Parish Center on Jones Road.

"It's a dream come true for everyone involved. This is a great day," said Crawford, president of the board of trustees of the academy.

It also is the first Nativity Network school in Connecticut, modeled after a Jesuit-based program that has 47 schools that emphasize character development, self-esteem, personal responsibility, service to those in need and nonviolence.

St. Martin's program follows state and national standards and the archdiocesan curriculum is its base, said

Principal Mary Surowiecki. The school offers three meals a day, after-school activities and tutoring for its low-income pupils. Parental involvement is stressed. The day ends at 6:30 p.m.

On Tuesday, youngsters met Patrick Ryan, a Notre Dame High School senior who spent the summer collecting donations and school supplies for them, including backpacks.

As a result of Ryan's efforts, backpacks were on each child's desk Tuesday morning, Bowes said.

"It's cool. I will use this for my gym bag," said Demetrius Drew, 10, of New Haven.

Timothy Hutchinson II, 10, of New Haven, said he thinks he's going to like the academy.

"I think it's going to be fun. We learn more subjects like English, enrichment and religion," Timothy said.