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Question: How has your sense of community responsibility been informed and changed?

Before this summer, I lacked nearly all sense of community responsibility with regard to poverty. When I prayed to the Lord, I begged help with my own personal needs and particular situations undergone by people who I knew. I always felt badly for the poor, but the word “poor” was an abstraction. I rarely prayed for those who live and die in poverty, because I did not understand the severity, or reality, of their situations. I had no conception of what it meant to be poor. I listened to the gospels about loving and serving the poor, but these words were empty and meant very little to me. I chose this summer service project not because it involved living with the homeless and running a summer camp for children who live in poverty, but because I was searching for a project with an intense spiritual component. I had heard over and over again that Jesus calls His people to serve the poor, but until two months ago, I had figured this was not *my* calling.

When I was picked up at the airport and driven to the shelter, I made feeble attempts to hide my anxiety. We pulled up to an old, but beautiful southern mansion built in 1905; it was surrounded by a chain fence and rundown houses in one of the worst residential areas I had ever seen. The Sisters, Mother Theresa’s Missionaries of Charity, were in the middle of their Holy Hour when I arrived and I was led into their simple chapel in the convent adjacent to the shelter. I was overwhelmed by the black letters that spelled “I THIRST” on the wall next to the crucifix. The words struck me despite my lack of understanding of them. I later discovered the same words written in the sitting room where the women who stayed in the shelter rest each day.

These words rang in my head for the next eight weeks. My experiences with the poor and the time I spent in prayer shed light on the multiple meanings of Jesus’ last request on the cross. My increased understanding of these words transformed my idea of community responsibility. I began to realize that Jesus’ thirst was not for vinegar on hyssop, *but for souls*. Thus, I sought Jesus in the poor, and made humble efforts to satiate His thirst by serving Him through them. In prayer I tried to bind my will to His, and found that it is Jesus’ will that we serve Him in the poor. It was ultimately this realization through time in prayer, confirmed by my experiences with the poor., that “informed and changed my sense of community responsibility”. Serving the poor is our responsibility because Jesus calls us to slake His divine thirst for souls. And, the only way to quench Jesus’ thirst for souls is to quench souls’ thirst for Him.

This was not an immediate discovery. The compilation of many experiences with the women in the shelter, the volunteers, and the Sisters resulted in my gradual understanding of Jesus’ desire to be loved through the poorest of the poor. These experiences were the “how” of my revelation, and I will touch on some of them . However, I am conscious that no amount of rhetoric could ever do them justice, and am

wary of reducing life changing moments and the suffering of the poor into evidence for a paper. Despite this concern, I will attempt to recount some of the situations Jesus delicately placed in my life in order to help me understand His thirst for souls.

My first few weeks at the shelter were overwhelming. I was absorbing information about the rules of the shelter, the Sisters' mentality, and the stories of the residents at a rate too fast for retention. One duty of the Housemother is to bless each woman with holy water before they go to bed. During my second week at the shelter, I was blessing a room that held two very young women and their baby boys, and was unintentionally caught up in their conversation. I found myself listening their stories and trying to offer them consolation. The younger of the two was nineteen, and had been kicked out of her home because her baby cried during the night, The father of her son was in jail, and this shelter was the first she had stayed in. She told me repeatedly that she missed her mother and wanted to go home. She was sinking into depression, and I meekly offered her Jesus as a life raft. I urged that she grab hold of Him with everything she had, but she seemed hesitant. After we talked for a while, (well past their lights out curfew), the other woman looked at me and told me that God had brought me to Memphis for a reason. She said that I would go home and tell my friends about the women who were struggling in Memphis, and they would never believe me. She gave me a look that asked, now you know; what are you going to do about it?"

This encounter was only the beginning of my realization of Jesus' unquenched thirst. As I spent more time with the ladies in the shelter I began to have a heightened sensitivity of their need for Christ. The authors of Compassion express this truth in their words, "in service we meet people, and in them the suffering Christ" (117). At first I thought I could satisfy them by getting them what they asked for, or by making the breakfasts they liked best. Bit by bit I gained an infinitesimally small understanding of their pain, and the pain Jesus suffers because they live with difference towards Him. I began to clean and cook and take care of the women not because I wanted to make them happy, but because I wanted to slake the thirst of Jesus, *within them*.

I underwent many similar experiences throughout my time in Memphis, and though I forget some, they have all impacted me. However, one encounter towards the end of my stay particularly strikes me when I reflect on my development of a sense of "community responsibility". As I was performing the routine inspection of one woman's belongings, she vented to me about her day. She spoke about being upset because she was not able to get a ride from one place to another, and perhaps I did not satisfy her with the sympathy she craved to hear. She looked at me defiantly and retorted, "you've had a ride your whole life". I was *very* upset by this, and did not bother to hide my feelings. With bitterness in my voice I reminded her that she knew little about me. I was both shocked and hurt because up to this point, we had gotten along well. The woman was ignorant of my history, and I was irritated because I felt her comment negated any difficulty I had endured. Her words tormented me throughout the evening and I dreaded facing her to give her a blessing that night. As I blessed her forehead she apologized to me. I tried to explain to her that my life had not been perfect and my opportunity to go to school had not been gift-wrapped and given to me like a birthday present.

The words she uttered in response disarmed me. She explained that she was not talking about having money or an easy life, but about my “ride” in an intangible sense. She told me she watched my love and trust in God, and that I was *blessed* to have this at age nineteen. I walked out of her room completely humbled. I had been a fool; I have had “a ride” my entire life. She saw me set apart from the women in the shelter not because of my race or education, but *because of my love for the Lord*. She knew that ultimately they did not really need money or a life free of hardship, but rather to trust in Jesus Christ. This encounter added evidence to what my prayer and other experiences with the poor had begun to impart on me: we are called to bring Jesus to and find Jesus in suffering souls. The woman helped me understand I have been blessed because I *know* I thirst for Jesus. Responsibility comes with this grace and I am called to share this with others who suffer and thirst but *do not know Him!*

My “sense of community responsibility” came not only from the women in the shelter, but from the volunteers who selflessly sacrificed to serve Christ. A woman who took over for me one night a week came faithfully and without complaint, even though she had spent countless hours caring for her aunt who was extremely ill. Another young woman cleaned with me one day during the week, and helped every day with summer camp. She labored longer and harder than any volunteer, and during those hours I heard pieces of the immense burdens she endures with an intense love for Christ. These people embraced their calling to quench Christ’s thirst. They sacrificed to serve the poor, and did this solely for Jesus. I was surrounded by a community of people who had heard Jesus’ call on the cross, and was responding to it; *every* community has the responsibility to do the same.

I hesitate to write of how the Sisters influenced me, because some experiences cannot be adequately recounted with words. They have devoted their entire lives, without reservation, to two words: “I THIRST”. They recognize their own, overwhelming thirst for Christ, and slake their desire for Jesus through the poor. They try each day to abandon their wills entirely to Jesus’ will, and to see Him in the distressing disguise of the poorest of the poor. I never ceased to be humbled in their presence. When my own fatigue and desire for comfort plagued me, I thought of the sacrifices the Sisters made and united to the cross of Christ.

I was blessed with the opportunity to glimpse into their sacrificial way of living. Christ is the center of all their actions, and this focus is maintained through their devotion to prayer. I was most impacted by joining in their prayer times and visits to the poor. During the two months, I frequented daily mass and Eucharistic adoration. The more time I spent in prayer, the more I realized that the shelter experiences alone would not yield a greater understanding for the poor. The Holy Spirit enlightened me in prayer as I reflected on the different situations I had undergone with the shelter women.

Visiting the poor families in the neighborhood also involved prayer. The Sisters prayed both with the families, and while on the way to visit them. The Sisters brought food to give to the families, but more important was the spiritual nourishment they

offered through prayer. Despite all I had seen and heard from the shelter women, I was still completely overwhelmed the first time I walked into one of the small, dilapidated houses that made up our neighborhood. Most of the houses I visited were those of children who attended our summer camp, and my compassion for the poor was deeply affected when I entered the homes of children I knew by name. In the words of Robert Coleman, “you can read a lot in books about the culturally deprived child, but when you’re sitting on a couch in a ghetto apartment building, looking and listening and wondering and worrying, then it’s a different story” (course packet 37). The members of these families lived with addictions and pain I had never experienced. I watched the Sisters try to quench their thirsts not with earthly remedies, but with Jesus Christ. I discovered that food and shelter only provide temporary consolation. The wounds of the poor run deeper than any physical ailment, and require a more profound cure. The Sisters understand the unrealized desire for Christ in the poorest of the poor, and thus try to acquaint them with their Savior through prayer. Visiting the poor and praying with the Sisters added to the “sense of community responsibility” I was slowly gaining. I saw the poor thirst for something that cannot be assuaged by earthly means. I realized that, like the Sisters, we are called to serve the poor by serving Christ in them.

Jesus’ words “I THIRST” have become the foundation of my understanding of service to the poor. I learned through my experience with the shelter women, interaction with volunteers, and time spent with the Sisters, the only way to serve the poor is to serve Jesus hidden within them. In this way, Jesus’ thirst for souls is quenched as souls are satiated with Him. My understanding of “community responsibility” centers on this truth. Thus, those in the community who know Jesus are called to help make Him known to those who suffer without knowledge of His love for them. We are not called to serve for ourselves, or for the people who suffer, *but for Christ*.

“Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of the least brothers of mine, you did for me” (Matthew 25:40).

Works Cited

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McNeill, Donald P., Douglas A. Morrison, and Henri J. M. Nouwen. Compassion. Doubleday: New York, 1966.

