

SHARED VISIONS

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Volume Thirteen, Number Two

— A publication to assist in the spiritual formation of lay volunteers — presented by the people who bring you *Connections* —

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

The Incarnation of Jesus, God's own self-disclosure to humanity, is a moment of light in contrast with the darkness of poverty and injustice. Or is it? What does God's self-disclosure mean for volunteers? How are volunteers incarnated in the lives of the people they serve, their fellow volunteers, and vice versa? In a way, like Jesus, the God made-flesh, volunteers seek to bring their own light and darkness across boundaries of race and class, etc.— sometimes into the darkness of the unknown. We hope that volunteers will find it hopeful to reflect on their experiences in light of the Incarnation.

Included in this issue are some activities and reflections that further this theme.

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Merry Christmas
Volunteers

How Well Do You Know Your Fellow Volunteers?

Objective: Through a couple of fun and simple activities, volunteers cross into the reality of the memories, idiosyncracies, family history and passions of their fellow community members. In doing so, they gain a better understanding of each other as unique people.

Approximate Time: Minimum 30 minutes

Materials: Pen and paper

Directions: Photocopy or otherwise duplicate the following list of questions, one for each community member. Each person answers the questions individually by writing the appropriate name next to the question. When everyone is done writing, go around the circle for each question, sharing your answers with the group.



- 1- Who in your community is now living the farthest from his or her hometown?
- 2- Who in your community is the biggest sports fan? Of what sport?
- 3- What are the middle names of your community members?
- 4- How many siblings does each community member have?
- 5- What did your community members study in school?
- 6- Who in your community has the most infectious laugh?
- 7- Who in your community is the dancing queen or king?
- 8- Who in your community is the gourmet chef?
- 9- Who in your community can't stand to leave the house in the morning without making his or her bed?
- 10- Who in your community is the practical joker?
- 11- When are the birthdays of your community members?
- 12- Who in your community is the peacekeeper/mediator in times of conflict?
- 13- Who in your community is the best recycler?

Another Idea: Volunteer Community Charades!

Put all of the names of community members in a bowl. Each member picks out a name (throw it back in if you get your own and pick again until you get a name that isn't yours!) Take a few moments to think about how you would describe that person without using words. Instead use gestures in such a way that your other community members would guess who you have written on your sheet. The volunteer who can make their community correctly guess the fastest is the winner! Just a note—this is meant to be a fun, endearing game to see how well you are getting to know each other. So, no teasing allowed that isn't loving! Have fun! ✚

Alternative Giving Ideas



"Look Sally, I made you this nice necklace of hemp and palm fronds!"

Creative Ways to Give Responsibly and Creatively For Any Occasion

In community consider exchanging gifts on the Feast of the Epiphany, January 6th, rather than on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. This could be a good way to take the focus off of the consumerism side of Christmas and focus on the true spirit of the holiday.

Make a "memory jar" for a family member or close friend: Over the course of a week or a month each time you think of a special memory about that person write it down on a slip of paper. Once you have a good number collected put them all in a jar. Decorate the jar if you wish.

Use brown paper grocery bags for gift wrap. Sponge paint the paper bag once you've wrapped the gift.

Make jewelry.

Collect stories from friends and family and make a memory album about the person who will receive the gift.

Write an affirmation letter.

Decorate a picture frame with your artwork.

Assemble a collection of favorite recipes.

Consider donating to your favorite organization or volunteer program in the name of a loved one.

Fill a decorative glass bottle with olive oil, garlic, herbs and/or chili peppers. Top with an oil pour spout (found in gourmet cooking shops for less than \$2.)

Bake brownies or cookies and wrap in wax paper inside a nice tin.

Make a "healing basket" with homemade jams, preserves, cookies, teas, a mug, writing paper and pens. Decorate jars and basket with scrap fabric and ribbon.

Put together a baking mix, put it in an attractive sack, attach instructions, and tie with ribbon.

Make a cassette tape (or CD) of music with a handwritten note explaining why you chose each song, why it was important or why it makes you think of that person.

Make creative and colorful word cards as gift certificates like *Good for a Massage*, *Good for One Home Cooked Meal* or *Good for a Hug* etc. and attach cards to a metal ring.

Create a special memory calendar for 2003. Write in holidays and personal messages. Include pictures if possible.

Make small pillows out of scrap fabric and fill them with soothing herbs (lavender, rose etc.) which can be found in bulk at some health food stores.

Ask the Volunteer!

Sort of like *Dear Abby*- only YOU provide the answers AND stimulate discussion in community. As a community read these volunteers' dilemmas and come up with some sound advice. What are the deeper issues that these volunteers may be facing this holiday season?

Dear Volunteer,

I'm so bummed. I suggested that my community members watch together the video "Jesus of Nazareth" as preparation for Christmas. I had a bunch of thoughtful questions typed up to pass out after the movie for discussion. Well, after I brought this up at dinner last night my housemates didn't say anything. They just sort of changed the subject and said yeah, neat, great idea- please pass the Ramen noodles. I can't believe that they wouldn't care whatsoever for preparing spiritually in order to fully appreciate the beauty of the Incarnation! I feel pretty miffed because it's like I'm the only one in this community that cares about Christ and prayer. I mean, prayer is essential! Action *and* contemplation! Right? How do I get them to understand this and prepare for Christmas as a community in a meaningful way? I feel this is my contribution to make to the group, but they don't seem to want that kind of contribution. What do I do here? - *Bummed in Boston*

Dear Volunteer,

Help! I don't want to go home for Christmas and I don't know how to say this to my mom and siblings who are expecting me. I've been working at an orphanage school for 3 months now and really want the experience of Christmas with the kids. This will kill my mom because Christmas at our house is always such a big deal. I'm also conflicted about the way my family goes all out on decorations, gourmet food and lots of electronics as presents. I don't want that for my life. Besides, the kids need me here. Who should take precedence here- my family or "my kids"? And what about the "preferential option for the poor"? - *Puzzled in Pittsburgh*

LIGHT AND DARK

One of the beautiful aspects of Christmas time is its use of the symbolism of light and darkness. People who have hit an emotional low are familiar with the dark side. For them, it's about getting a personal wake up call, about the need for personal change, about resolution to improve one's life, to choose light over darkness. The popular classic tale of Scrooge is just such a turnaround story. But the symbolism goes a bit deeper. Consider the following references to this light/darkness theme in history and spirituality.

Buddhism

For the past 2500 years, Buddhism has taught that the white lotus flower, a symbol of enlightenment, of the fully actualized self, blooms only when it grows in very muddy water. Translation: spiritual enlightenment happens only when one is immersed in humanity's limitations and daily suffering. This was the Buddha's highest and final teaching before he entered nirvana. The light and dark were not opposites negating one another but complementary elements of a supportive synthesis. The eternal and temporal are complementary.

Egyptian

Egyptians, four thousand years ago, celebrated the winter solstice as the longest night of the year, when their beloved sun god finally awakened and the days grew in sunlight.

Ancient Rome

In late December Romans had two traditional ways of celebrating the struggle of light over darkness. "Saturnalia", an eight day feast of pagan merriment lasted from December 17th to the 24th. Another religion, Mithraism, which was the most popular of Jesus' day and was especially among Roman soldiers, celebrated the birthday of their favorite sun-god Mithra, on December 25th.

Christianity

Christians chose late December as the time to celebrate Jesus' birth not only because that is the darkest time of the year. Pope Julius 1 (352 A.D.) was the first to chose December 25th for the date of Christmas, thereby co-opting the pagan practices of the day.

John's Gospel saw in Christ the answer to these forms of darkness. John 8:12 recalls Jesus saying: "I am the light of the world." Today, we light the Christ candle at the Christmas midnight mass and we sing: *Lumen Christi. Thanks be to God.* Furthermore, the high point of the Christian worship, is the Easter Vigil, when, in total darkness, Christians praise Christ as the light of the world.

Christians have also traditionally gone to great pains to build churches and cathedrals on an east-west axis, sunlight vs. darkness, so the worshipers were always facing the rising sun and altar (east) and standing with their backs to the darkness of the west (door).

Modern Psychology

Psychologist Carl Jung wrote of the shadow side of the personality. He saw it as the unactualized potential or the socially unacceptable aspects which can in reality be the bright and fruitful side of the personality. †

The Light and Darkness in Our Lives Personal or Dyad Reflection Activity



How do you deal with light and darkness in your life?
Which is more your song? "I'm Walkin' On Sunshine"
or "Hello Darkness My Old Friend"?

Make a list of the positive forces in your life, those images, memories, people, objects, events etc. that bring light and life into your existence. Choose the top three sources of light for you.

Likewise make a list of dark forces in your life. Experience, people etc. that emanate darkness in your memory and psyche. You may find that some things are in both categories. Choose the top three most important sources of darkness for you.

Journal or share with fellow volunteers or a friend your thoughts or associations with these forces. Also consider the following questions.

How have these experiences, feelings, memories etc. stayed with you or influenced you in both positive and negative ways?

What have you learned from the moments of darkness?

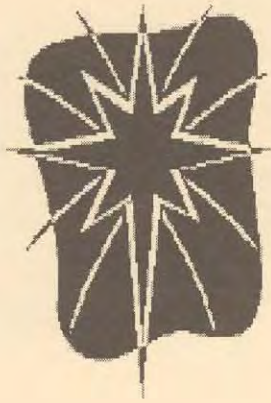
How do the positive forces in your life interact with the darkness? In what ways (if any) are they flip sides of each other?

In what ways are the joyous and light-filled aspects of your life a gift to others?

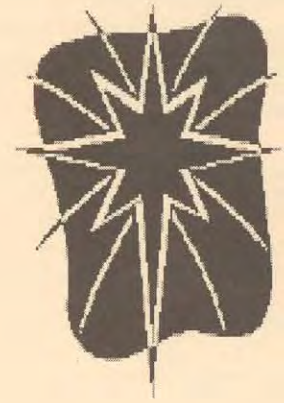


Pondering the Incarnation

Below is a poetic quote by Father Andrew Greeley that deals with the mystery and challenge of the Incarnation. Use this piece and the questions that follow as a private journal reflection or group discussion.



It might be easy to run away to a monastery,
away from the commercialization, the hectic
hustle, the chaotic world around us.
Then we would have a holy Christmas.
But we would forget the lesson of the
Incarnation, of the enfleshing of God—
the lesson that we who are followers of Jesus
do not run away from the secular;
rather we embrace it and, in doing so,
transform it.



It is our mission to make holy the secular aspects
of life...by being holy people...

Published with permission of the author
Rev. Andrew Greeley

Questions

What are your feelings surrounding Christmas time as a volunteer? In what ways do the commercialism and “hectic hustle” affect you?

Describe what a “Holy Christmas” would look and feel like for you.

How does the Incarnation -- God becoming human -- transform the world?

How do you as a volunteer transform the people you serve?

How are you transformed by the people you serve?

In what ways can we be holy people in the world this Christmas?

What's Your Story?

The St. Vincent Pallotti Center is interested in hearing from you. The next two editions of Shared Visions for the 2002-2003 cycle will deal with the themes below. If you have any short stories of those “ah ha” moments, (250 words or less) poems, or even community night activities that were particularly engaging or useful, which deal with the issues listed, please contact us. Send us your write up of these topics. Favorite community recipes are welcome too.

Mid-year concerns

Finally finding your balance, resolving community conflicts, finding outside support, how initial expectations changed.

End-year concerns

Closure issues, making the transition out of the volunteer experience, telling your story to others.

Christmas Then and Now: Volunteers *Incar*nate Warmth & “Glue”

Volunteers are familiar with the idea that their work with the poor (or rich) extends God’s love and mercy in today’s world. On good days, volunteers help make it happen for their clients. In a sense then, because you ‘incarnate’ God’s love for others, your volunteering extends God’s Christmas event, God’s act of sending Jesus to be a healing presence in the world. President J.F. Kennedy put it simply: “God has no hands but ours.”

Volunteers, based on their own childhood Christmas celebrations, can imagine the warmth and togetherness of that first Christmas scene. The event’s contrasts bring out the closeness. There is the baby who is helpless yet nestled securely with his parents. The family is temporarily homeless, yet sheltered in a lowly stable. They are unknown travelers in Bethlehem yet celebrated by all creation, by shepherds, kings, angels, animals, and a star. And yet, theology can take us beyond sentiment.

The genius of St. Francis of Assisi (1181-1226) was responsible for articulating a very attractive theology of Christmas. Because of his insights, the Christmas crèche, the mini manger and creatures, has become both the center of every Christian village worldwide, and a centerpiece in each household’s celebration of Christmas. Francis emphasized a theology which affirmed this human side of God’s presence. He taught that God became poor to identify with humanity and with creation. For Francis, the birth of Jesus happened not 1,200 years earlier, but it happens anew with each Christmas. So those alive today are no less privileged than the shepherds of Bethlehem in the days of Herod. Each generation can affirm and participate in this miracle of God’s gift of self to the world.

Francis recognized that by God becoming part of creation, all of creation was now transformed and privileged. One way he expressed this was by always placing an ox and donkey next to the crèche to affirm that all creation-- humanity, animals and even the stars now had an elevated dignity and was closely connected with our humanity. He spoke, therefore, of “Brother Sun” and “Sister Moon.” Even flowing water sang God’s praises. Another radical Franciscan insight was that the world was not an evil place full of wicked temptations, but rather was essentially good, with every person being a brother and sister in the human family. The world was to be embraced as good, not shunned as evil. Francis’ monks embraced the world rather than escaped it.

Francis believed Jesus came to perfect creation and be its crown. This suggests the Incarnation would have happened for that purpose even if Adam and Eve had not sinned. St. Paul’s epistles affirm this positive view of the earth: God’s plan was to “sum up all things in Christ, in heaven and on earth” (Ephesians 1:10). Jesus is the glue that holds together all of creation: “He is before all things, and in him all things hold together (Colossians 1:15-17). Volunteers help spread this cohesion. ✚



GOZZOLI, Benozzo *Scenes from the Life of St. Francis* 1452. Apsidal Church of San Francesco, Montefalco, Italy. For Francis, the above Nativity scene was contemporary and not an anachronism.

Questions for volunteers, for individual thought or community discussion:

When you think about Jesus’ birth, to what extent do you see him coming mainly to save people from God’s blame? To perfect creation? What would it be like to think of Jesus coming to perfect creation?

When you think about your volunteer service, to what extent do you see yourself saving a wounded world? Helping to right imbalances? Perfecting the earth? Saving yourself?

To what extent is Christmastime for you an event you want to celebrate? Is it more a celebration of a past event? Mainly something to get through?

What are some aspects of humanity you find easy to see as good? Which are more difficult for you to see as good?

Bible Reflection: Angelic Volunteers? What's Your Message?

At Christmas time, angels are usually given more air time. Although they make regular appearances in contemporary TV shows, as do Monica and Tess in *Touched By An Angel*, and are given stand-in parts in everyday church statuary, the voices of angelic choirs rise to their fullness in Christmas carols (*Angels We Have Heard On High*). This season is when they are given prominent roles in children's Nativity plays and become the key witnesses in the biblical readings of Jesus' birth.

But what is their role really, and how does it pertain to you as a volunteer? The scriptures are crystal clear in teaching that angels are messengers. The Greek word itself, *angelos*, means messenger. But their individual personal names tell you the particular nature of their message. The archangel Michael, for example, drives Satan from heaven and so Michael's very name is his battle cry, a child-



ing message to the dark side, literally "Who is like unto God?" (Mi-ca-el). The same custom prevails for the other angels. The archangel Rafael's name means "God is the healer" (Tobit 3:17). It is the archangel Gabriel, the "power of God," who tells Mary that by the power of God she is pregnant with Jesus (Luke 1:19, 26).

Christianity, no doubt, invites us to be angels to one another (Hebrews 13:1). Your volunteer year(s), then, in one sense could be seen as a boot camp for a lifetime of angelic service. If this works for you, what's your personal message? If your clients were to summarize what message they have heard you bringing to them these recent months, what would they say it was? By what name or description do you want to be known? For example, "one who brings laughter," "the organizer," "generous clown," "sincere helper," other? To whom would you like to be assigned to empower, heal or protect? ✚

Shared Visions

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Editors: Andrew Thompson, Dani Clark Scano, Kaela Volkmer

Production Editor: Dani Clark Scano

Advisors: Rev. Frank Donio, S.A.C., Rev. Bob Kinast, Bill Lowell, Sr. Anita Joseph Reeves and Pallotti Center Directors: Kristelle Angelli, Maureen Cunningham, Ryan Downs and Anita Morawski.

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The mission of the Saint Vincent Pallotti Center:

To promote lay volunteer service that challenges laity, clergy, and religious to work together in the mission of the Church. Our goal is to support lay volunteers *before, during* and *after* their term of service. Regional Pallotti Centers are located in Boston; Paterson, NJ; St. Louis; and Sacramento. The National Office is in Washington, DC.

The Centers take their inspiration from Saint Vincent Pallotti (1795-1850) who believed passionately in the laity, in each person as being an image of God and as called to be missionary.

Shared Visions' goal is to explore five building blocks of spiritual development: Intellectual Growth, Emotional and Physical Health, Leadership and Prayer.



The Saint Vincent Pallotti Center
for Apostolic Development
415 Michigan Ave., NE
Washington, DC 20017
(202) 529-3330 (in DC area)
or toll-free: (877) VOL-LINK
pallotti@pallotticenter.org
www.pallotticenter.org

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