



Shared Visions

A publication to assist in the spiritual formation of lay volunteers
presented by the Saint Vincent Pallotti Center ...

...The people who bring you Connections

© 1996 The Saint Vincent Pallotti Center

Volume Six, Number Two

Just Let Go and Love!

Fabio Hurtado, Former Capuchin Franciscan Volunteer

I'd like to tell you that you are not alone, that people you don't even know pray for you, that somewhere far off or very near there are others doing the same thing. I'd like to say that what you are doing is courageous, perhaps revolutionary. I'd like to say such things as, "Embrace your pain, carry your cross, remain a disciple." I'd like to appeal to whatever made your leap of faith possible. I'd like to stir your sense of justice and desire for peace. Last January though, smack dab in the middle of my volunteer year as a fourth grade teacher in inner city Baltimore, those appeals would have made little sense to me.

Far off seemed the early community days of Friday happy hour at the Wharf Rat down at Fell's Point, or the adamant

commitment to get to school early every morning. No one set the table with a couple of candles or rushed to do dishes. On the weekends the house was a ghost town. Fourth grade didn't seem as heroic as I once had pictured it to be. Prayer became routine. The singing was horrendous. This community thing I had promised was a bit too real. It was time to quit. I had learned all my lessons. It was a great experience. No sense in punishing myself.

I was also angry. Why did we have to ignore the rectory door bell after a certain time? We lived right upstairs! Because hungry people would ask, would beg, would make up any story imaginable to get something, anything? Liz and I answered it early in the year and ended up giving canned food, a

continued page 2

In This Issue:

Mid-way through any experience, people often hit ruts. Volunteer life is no different. In this issue of *Shared Visions* we explore certain hard times many volunteers come upon several months into their term of service. Among other things, you will find . . .

- Advice and encouragement in dealing with mid-year frustrations
- Insights into cultural adjustments
- Personal reflection questions
- An opportunity to walk in someone else's footsteps.

your local YMCA or Boys' and Girls' Club, but a small temporary building with a basketball court and a little field on the top of a huge hill surrounded by some of the poorest homes I had ever seen in my life.

I certainly had a lot to learn!

And I did! Three weeks after I arrived in Tijuana, I was changed from the first center to another one. I was devastated. I was just beginning to feel slightly comfortable in Flores Magon. My Spanish was still negligible. I was not only to be changed to another center, but to also be the coordinator of it. I couldn't believe it. I had no idea what to do. I was overwhelmed with anxiety and fear. I didn't know anything. How could I be in charge when I couldn't even communicate? I cried and then I prayed. I didn't have a choice, though, that was my assignment. It had to be my "yes" to God. I realized that on the

continued page 3

At Home Where You Are

Cathy Debritz, Former Salesian Lay Missioner

I arrived in Tijuana, Mexico on September 9, 1992 to begin my first year as a Salesian Lay Missioner. I decided to join the Salesian Lay Missioners because their focus is youth. I had studied International Studies and Political Science and had concentrated on Latin America, so I really wanted to go to a Latin American country. I might add that I also felt like I knew so much about Latin American culture that I wouldn't have adjustment problems or feel the effect of culture shock. HA! All the studying in the world couldn't have prepared me for all that I was about to experience. Needless to say, I was not prepared. I didn't know one-eighth of what I thought I did about Mexican culture or ministry within that culture. I spoke almost no Spanish. I left my safe environment and suddenly found myself immersed in a new culture, a new

"family" (my community) and a new job. As most of you know from your own experience, those first three months seem like the hardest months of your life! It was an emotional roller coaster. I felt useless and frustrated. There were so many changes and so much to learn. I certainly didn't feel prepared or even vaguely qualified for what I was doing. Terminally independent woman that I am, I soon found myself completely dependent on others to help me understand what was going on.

I began working in one of the *Colonias* or little towns, called Flores Magon on the outskirts of the city of Tijuana in a "youth center." Not like

sandwich, some milk, a coat or a bit of money for bus fare they needed to get to a new job. Why did we have to get a community of six to gather for prayer and discussions about our poverty stricken, drugged out neighborhood in southwest Baltimore? Didn't we go to Viva House -- the Baltimore Catholic Worker House -- and admire their commitment? If we couldn't be radicals here and now, then where and when? If it couldn't be perfect then why bother at all?

At school I felt out of place as a Hispanic in a classroom of 24 Black children. Their role model should have been someone like themselves, someone who has lived their pain, who has seen in second grade a mother shot and killed by a drug dealer. Someone who could explain the subtle ambiguities of racism from lived experience. I also struggled with poor organizational skills and spells of fatigue and/or depression. Not to mention that I never took a course in education!

I once heard Richard Rohr say that to stand vigilantly in anger as a guard is to be a prisoner yourself. There I was a prisoner to my ideals, to my lofty goals of perfection. A prisoner in my community, angry and disappointed with our failures. A prisoner in my classroom where reactionary despotism perhaps led me to suppress creativity and punish individuality all in the name of conformity. You must be quiet! You must not move, not flinch, not laugh, not feel, not love. Could I be that person?

The way out was not through a stricter set of rules in the classroom or at home, not through judging or moralizing. Christ was right after all; the way out was through love. What is Jesus if not the very incarnation of love wandering through a barren land among people who rarely understand? How frustrating must it be to keep repeating: "Just love! Let go of all your judgments, for God does not judge you. Don't become obsessed with your sister's failures until you realize and heal your own!" And here was Christ daily repeating, "Fabio, just love them! Let go, and love!"

How liberating it was to walk into fourth grade and know I did not have to be perfect. Yes, I came from a different culture and set of circumstances. But somehow and for some reason, God had thrown us all together in that small room in Maryland. Would I waste the opportunity whining about my lack of this or that? Would I go totally berserk when Anthony left his desk without permission for the 20th time to sharpen his already sharp pencil? Or would I approach him and laugh together at the fact that the pencil

was already sharp and he was trying to get one over on the teacher? Yes, I would laugh! Because it is infinitely more loving to become one of the prisoners than to play the role of savior. We are all prisoners. There is only one savior. So

when James made a joke I found myself not only laughing, but getting strange looks from the class when I was the last one to stop. Not because I faked it, but because once I let go, it was funny! It was hilarious!

"There I was a prisoner to my ideals, to my lofty goals of perfection."

At home it became easy to realize how committed we all were to the year. Yes, we daily left a collection of dirty plastic cups in the sink. Yes, sometimes someone slept through prayer--it happened to me! We weren't as polite as during the first month, but that was something to celebrate. We were a family, and family is not polite. Politeness is for the person you can't tell the truth to. Did we argue in the car on the way to work? Yes, but how much less of a loving human being would I be today without those discussions? The reality was that we couldn't invite the neighborhood up to dinner everyday. No, that would have been silly and dangerous. Not to mention impossible with our stipend! A person on crack is not that peaceful and loving. But when someone put out the call to go to a vigil for someone killed by cops in the neighborhood, we were there. People still jogged together in the mornings. In May we sacrificed food and gave money to the parish. We all did that. And now my only regret is that I did not love my roommates more deeply, more openly, more totally.

What held me together that January was not ideas or ideals; it was people. Thomas Merton writes to a friend, "It is so easy to get engrossed with ideas and slogans and myths that in the end one is left holding the bag, empty, with no trace of meaning left in it." I went to Baltimore full of ideals and slogans. The process of flushing those out was painful. It was more comfortable, safer, to keep a slogan, an ideal. After all, ideals and slogans have no life of their own. You are in control. When they become real in the people you serve and those you live with it can be scary (you've lost control), but it is in the end amazing to behold. We are asked to die to ourselves, and in dying we will have life!

If I say you are not alone, look around you and see your community and love them. It is hard to let go of anger and of righteousness. But, Christ didn't ask us to be right all the time, to be the guards of the prison. We are simply being asked to give, to love. If I say people pray for you and you don't know it, think of your friends and family back home. They are real. If I say you are courageous and revolutionary, it is because it takes strength to love people, to serve people. I challenge you to remember that you are not an island. People have shaped you, loved you, hurt you. And you've done the same right back. It is all part of this wonderful game Christ calls us to be part of: Life. Where would you be without it? +

"Christ didn't ask us to be right all the time . . . We are simply being asked to give, to love."

surface I had given a year of my life to serve God and His people, but I kept giving it conditions. "I'll go to Mexico, but ...I'll help the poor youth in one place, but not the other." This time I had to say "yes" to God all the way. Although leaving seemed like an option, I reluctantly began working in the new site.

Besides the regular getting used to the culture things, like understanding what "Mexican time" means and that people are more important than time or money, I also had to learn how to be a coordinator of a Salesian Oratory

(youth center).

There was no book I could study, no professor who was going to teach me what to do; there wasn't even a job description! We

were just supposed to organize activities; youth groups, catechism, bible study, weekly masses, sports leagues...

ANYTHING that kept the kids off the streets. In English I could do that, but in Spanish? Let alone to a bunch of gang members, who were, by the way, the ones who frequented our oratory the most. I just wanted to make a difference; to help some kids that needed me. I never expected it to be that hard.

Don't ask me what I expected, because I don't really know. If there ever was a time to miss home, it was then. I just as easily could have packed my bags and returned to the states. But I searched deep down inside of myself and found some courage hiding behind all the fear and frustration, and paired it with the faith I had that God must have really wanted me there. Then I dug my heels in and began a long learning process.

I began. I began to stop comparing Mexicans with Americans and to learn from the culture. I began to realize that I didn't have to do that much, because my presence and sacrifice was my biggest testimony. I began to learn about the kids and their families. I began to stop trying to change things and do them the American way and to figure out how to do them the Mexican way. I began to pray like I never prayed

in all my life! In a nutshell, I learned what humility was. I also learned that I had a lot to learn--about people, about God and especially about myself.

I doubted myself about 100 times a day. I wondered what I was doing there and missed the comforts of home, like clean water and paved roads. Finally, in December, it was like things just began to click. December is a beautiful time in Mexico. It was not because of the climate or the Christmas decorations or whatever makes December beautiful in the US. It was because of the religious

" I just wanted to make a difference; to help some kids that needed me. I never expected it to be hard. "

celebrations. December begins with a 12- day observance to Our Lady of Guadalupe. I was in awe. I admire the pure and utter faith these people have. It's a faith I can only aspire to have some day. People process in the streets singing songs and praying the rosary. Each night the portrait of Our Lady is displayed in another person's house. On December 12, there is a big celebration for the feast day. Then, the nine days before Christmas are celebrated with the *Posadas*. Each night there is a reenactment of Mary and Joseph going from house to house looking for shelter for the night. There was no talk about

" Being immersed in another culture is definitely a challenge. But it has a lot of benefits. "

Christmas presents or shopping. There was only talk about the birth of Jesus!

It was right about Christmas time that I began to feel like I was getting through to some of the kids. On the first night of the *Posadas* we were leaving from the Oratory and the only kids that were around were some of the

gang members. I took a chance and asked them if they would like to join us. I asked two of them to carry the figurines of Mary and Joseph and then gave the rest of the people candles and song sheets and off we went. This marked the beginning of a rather uphill battle to change people's perceptions of these kids and help them in anyway I could. Those kids became "my boys" and they were the reason I stayed and worked through all of the difficulties. I felt like God sent me to them. Although it was always two steps forward three steps back with them, I knew I was making some kind of difference in their lives.

I was originally going to Mexico for just one year. By the end of the first year, I decided that I had spent most of my time learning and I really wanted to give back more. So, I went on for a second year to a different Oratory in Northern Mexico in a town called Huatabampo. The two years were very different from each another. In Huatabampo, I didn't have to go through all the adjustments and culture shock. In fact, half the time, I forgot I was different from the other people. I was the only US American around for miles, but I didn't feel like a foreigner. I didn't compare cultures anymore. I just felt at home where I was.

After that second year, I was so comfortable in my surroundings, I could have stayed. I, like most people who volunteer, was transformed. I gained so much from the two years I spent in Mexico, I can't even put it all into

words. I learned a million and one lessons from the Mexican people. Now, when I reflect on those difficult times, I remember it rather fondly. I do, because I see that is where I grew the most, as a person and as a Christian. Being

immersed in another culture is definitely a challenge, but it has a lot of benefits. I don't believe that you can truly understand people until you understand their background and culture. So, I think that the old saying is true, "don't judge a person until you walk a mile in his moccasins" -- or live a year or two in his or her country. +

WORKSHEET QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

1. Fabio felt "out of place" as a Hispanic in a classroom of 24 Black children. Describe any way you have felt "out of place" in your current environment.

2. After much frustration and questioning, Fabio had the realization that God was telling him to let go and love. In what ways can you apply this advice to your work and community life this year?

3. Sighting Thomas Merton, Fabio felt a painful transition when his ideals that accompany "serving the poor" translated themselves into real people. For him it was scary and yet amazing. To what extent have you had this type of experience?

4. During her early volunteer months, when Cathy's work seemed too hard to endure, she searched behind her fear and found courage somewhere deep within. What are some of your personal sources of courage? Does faith play a role? How?

5. Cathy described language and cultural differences as main obstacles in her problem adjusting to Mexico. Name three major challenges in your adjustment period as a volunteer.

6. At one point during her two years in Mexico, Cathy stopped comparing US and Mexican cultures. She no longer felt like a foreigner. In your volunteer experience, be it State side or abroad, how "at home" do you feel?

TAKE A WALK IN SOMEBODY ELSE'S FOOTSTEPS



Understanding people is not always easy, especially when they come from different cultural backgrounds and experiences. Think of someone you know, someone different from you, someone you want to better understand. Maybe this person comes from a different background than you; maybe this person has different views than you; maybe you can't figure out what makes you different. Ask yourself, "What is it like to be _____? How can I better understand him/her?" Use the exercise below to walk a few steps where that person has walked. Maybe you'll make some discoveries along the way that will help you better understand what it is like to be him/her.

How did the journey begin for this person? How was he/she brought up? What was his/her cultural background?



What difficulties that you know about has he/she endured? How do you see these difficulties affecting who they are?

How are you two different? What are some ways in which the two of you are alike?



Pallotti Center Services for Former Volunteers

Whether you finished your volunteer service a week ago or a decade ago, you can benefit from our services designed specifically to meet the needs of returned lay volunteer missionaries. Take advantage!

The "What's Next?" Notebook: This notebook is designed to help you think through the decisions ahead and figure out how to incorporate your volunteer experience into whatever comes next. This notebook can point you toward several resources available to you at this leg of your journey. Also included in the notebook is information about the **Pallotti Center Job Bank**. Through this job bank, you can receive monthly employment listings from the Church and non-profit sectors. Your former program director should have copies of the notebook. Ask for one!

Network of Former Lay Volunteers and Missioners: There are literally thousands of former lay volunteers out there, living throughout the country. By joining our network, you can be in contact with others who have had a similar experience. All volunteer program directors have a master printout of network members who are interested in linking with others for everything from job leads to forming prayer groups. Ask your program director for a network form, or call any of our offices for one!

Shared Visions

A publication to assist in the spiritual formation of lay volunteers presented by the Saint Vincent Pallotti Center

©1996 The Saint Vincent Pallotti Center

Volume 6, Number 2

Editor: Andrew Thompson · **Production Editor:** Susan Marble Cuthbert

Advisors: Rev. Frank Donio, S.A.C., Susie Mullaney, Rev. Bob Kinast, Bill Lowell, Sr. Anita Joseph Reeves and Pallotti Center Directors: Wendy Borchers, Fabio Hurtado, Patrick Marcham, Joan Smith, and Betty Wallin.

©The Saint Vincent Pallotti Center

These materials are copyrighted. Unauthorized reproduction is prohibited. The Pallotti Center hereby gives permission to reproduce all or any of the contents of this publication so long as proper credit is given to the Saint Vincent Pallotti Center and so long as reproduced materials are distributed gratis.

The mission of the Saint Vincent Pallotti Center:

To promote lay volunteer service that challenges the 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. Local Pallotti Centers are located in Boston, Memphis, Paterson, Saint 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
Box 893-Cardinal Station
Washington, DC 20064
(202) 529-3330

NONPROFIT ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
WASHINGTON, DC
PERMIT NO. 3188