SHARED VISIONS

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Volume Eleven, Number Two

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

Many Spiritualities... One Spirit

by Tim Cashman
Response-Ability

Until I left college and entered a volunteer teaching program, community spirituality and my own individual spirituality were very similar in nature. However, during my year of service as a teacher and a member of an intentional community, my understanding of spirituality evolved. Indeed, it is still growing and changing, but my experience as a member of a dynamic and diverse volunteer community strongly impacted the general direction my spirituality has taken in the past several years.

As a young boy at our family's parish in New Jersey, in all of the schools I attended up through college, and in all of the different community groups I was a part of, I became accustomed to a certain expression of spirituality. Having been raised and educated in the Catholic tradition, the Mass and the sacraments have always held tremendous value for me. In addition to these elements, I have always placed importance on the development of my own prayer life. These three elements, the Mass, sacraments and prayer, have been the foundation of my spirituality. Moreover, they seemed to be the basis for the spirituality of most of those whom I met growing up. While at college, I encountered some people who disavowed the formal practice of religion all together. In general, however, I did not feel the need to identify with or accept other people's understanding of spirituality in any real way until I became part of a volunteer community.

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From the very beginning, our community, composed of four women and myself, struggled to find the most appropriate and meaningful expression of our group spirituality. My volunteer program, *Response-Ability*, was decidedly Catholic in its mission. After all, we were going to be teaching in the Catholic schools of Washington, D.C. and our year of service was underwritten by an order of Catholic nuns. As a group, however, we were not so well defined.

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INSIDE THIS ISSUE

Hola, volunteers and missioners! We send happy new year greetings as you continue to journey through your volunteer experience. We hope the stories and activities in this issue of *Shared Visions* encourage you to think about your spirituality and challenge you to grow in new ways.

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"Living Hope"

by Jill Switzer
Holy Cross Associates

Before ending my two year mission in Chile, I decided to go on a much needed retreat. The dates of the retreat happened to fall on the first few days of Advent. Although Christmas has passed, the spirit of Advent is still quite pertinent for me. The word for advent in Spanish is "adviento." Part of that word, "viento," means wind. And in Advent, we hope, we have "esperanza" for Jesus' coming. This wait, "espera" in Spanish, came to me as a gentle, refreshing breeze as my two years in Chile ended.

One of the Biblical texts for advent speaks of Jesus' coming as every valley being exulted and the hills made low (Luke 3: 5). For me, this passage speaks of justice and equality for all. The plight of the Chilean poor - my friends - is a life full of ups and downs, a strenuous climb just to make ends meet, many times tripping and falling down the slope only to have to pick oneself up again and start all over. I accompanied many in this roller coaster battle of sorts during my two years in Chile, yet always with the hope of Jesus' grace to make the rocky road just a little smoother.

How did I emotionally and spiritually survive this two year journey with rocks and holes along my path?

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Prayer. No matter where I was or what I was doing - on the bus, riding my bike, in a meeting, listening to a friend, singing, laughing, crying - I prayed. I offered my actions and my life to God. When I prayed, my life was "esperanza viva," living hope of seeing the path straightened. "Though I pass through dark valleys, I shall not fear" (Psalm 23). Yet when I did not pray, I lost that hope. I fell into a dark abyss of depression, loneliness, and desperation. I could not even pray "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" I knew deep down that God had not abandoned me, I had abandoned Him. I had lost hope.

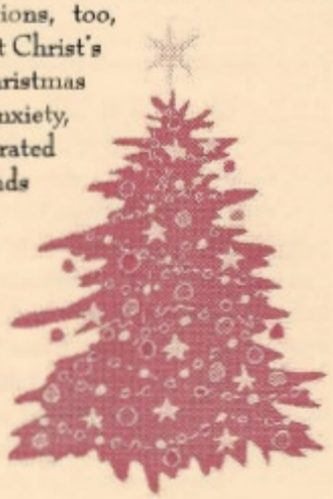
"In those moments of crisis, it was my volunteer community... that pulled me through and invited me to prayer once again."

In those moments of crisis, it was my volunteer community of fellow *Holy Cross Associates* that pulled me through and invited me to prayer once again. Our scheduled prayer time together was a saving grace. It was challenging because many times my stubbornness, my wanting to wallow in self-pity, prevented me from entering into prayer openly and with a positive attitude. But it was strange how ritual and the support of a community affected me. I found that I simply could not remain closed off to God, to my community-mates and to prayer. "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I also" (Matthew 18: 20).

I had a similar experience with a group of Chileans participating in a small, Church-based community during my second year in Chile. In each other we found support emotionally and spiritually. In doing so, little by little our valleys began to fill, our mountains began to diminish, our paths became a little straighter and smoother. In other words, our faith in God and each other began to grow. Through the sharing of our stories, we revealed our fears and desires and began to find hope as individuals and as a Christian community.

In my last weeks, the theme we discussed was the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Almost everyone named "sabiduria," wisdom, as the gift they most hoped to receive. I truly believe that the Holy Spirit is working in each one of us and that each day, with reflection, prayer and the grace of God, we are just a little more "sabio," wise.

The wisdom I acquired in Chile has led me to my own advent of sorts, and I wait with joyful hope for what's to come, that gentle, refreshing breeze. Mary, waiting for the birth of her Son, surely felt anxious, yet joyful, and fearful, yet hopeful. We, as Church, can feel these emotions, too, each year during advent as we await Christ's birth. This past Advent and Christmas was a special time for me, full of anxiety, joy, fear and hope as I celebrated Christmas with family and friends from home for the first time in two years. Now it is time for me to embark on a new journey, a road with all its hills and valleys, with the trust and "esperanza" that God will make the path - His Will - straight and clear. And so I pray, as always, Amen, "asi sea," let it be. ✚



African Cuisine

Former volunteer, Christina Neill, learned this recipe while in Zambia on a work trip with *Habitat for Humanity*. Christina tells us, "Nshima has proven to be a real crowd pleaser. My community liked it especially because they got to use their hands to eat! The ingredients are *really simple* - cornmeal and water. I like to make it with the cabbage recipe below."

Nshima: (serves 6) Boil 6 cups water in a large kettle. In a bowl, mix 1 cup white cornmeal and 1 cup water. Stir until smooth, then add to boiling water. Simmer 15-20 minutes, stirring occasionally. About a half cup at a time, add 2 1/4 - 2 1/2 cups extra cornmeal, and 1 tsp salt. After each half cup of cornmeal, stir well with wooden spoon until all dry particles disappear and all lumps are smoothed. Continue stirring vigorously a few more minutes until nshima is stiff enough to handle easily without dripping off fingers. Remove from heat, cover, and let stand 10 minutes. The longer it sits, the stiffer it becomes. Stir again before serving. Scoop nshima with a spoon into rounded mounds on a serving dish. Serve each person a mound. When cool enough to touch, break off finger size pieces and dip into other dishes (cabbage dish).

Sweet and Sour Cabbage: *Ingredients:* 1 head cabbage, 1 medium onion, 4 T olive oil, 2 tsp salt, 1 1/2 T sugar, 1 small can tomato sauce, 2 T wine vinegar. *Instructions:* Cut cabbage, remove core and slice into thin strips. Slice onion and saute in oil until limp. Add tomato sauce. Bring to a boil. Add cabbage and salt. Cook uncovered until cabbage is limp (5 - 7 min). Add vinegar, cover pan and cook slowly for 10 minutes. Stir in sugar and continue cooking covered for 15 minutes until tender, but not overcooked.

Questions for Jill's article:

- Jill found ways to bring prayer into her daily routines. What are some ways you can turn your activities into prayerful experiences?
- When Jill didn't make time for prayer, she felt lonely and depressed; when she did pray, her life was "esperanza viva," a living hope. How do you see prayer affecting your life? How has prayer been: difficult? boring? enriching? challenging?
- To what extent do you think of prayer as a "me and God" experience? Or, in what ways do you also experience prayer as a community experience? Give some example(s) and share your preferences with your fellow volunteers or friends.
- When you think about God or the Holy Spirit coming into your life, what images come to your mind? A refreshing, gentle breeze, as for Jill? A creative inspiration? A desire to serve the poor or correct a social injustice?
- When Jill and her Chilean community began to support one another emotionally and spiritually, their faith in God and each other grew. Jill experienced that being accountable to her community brought her back to prayer, even when she felt distant. In what ways does your community hold each other accountable? How is your community challenging you to grow?

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Three of our community members, including myself, were and are Catholic while the remaining two were of different faith traditions. I remember feeling somewhat disappointed when I learned that some in my community were not well versed in the Catholic faith. One of the first things that attracted me to *Response-Ability* was its mission to serve the Catholic schools. Early on in our volunteer year, in one of our weekly group prayer meetings, we shared our reasons for choosing this particular program. It became evident that the program's Catholic orientation was not as important for some in our community as it was for others. Those in the former category cited their interview experiences, the location of the program, and the support factor of community living as their main reasons for choosing to enter *Response-Ability*. As a result of this division in our community, it took months before we were able to be completely honest with each other in group prayer.

"When we began to really listen to each other and meet each other at our most vulnerable points, we grew as a spiritual community."

We had always been respectful of each other's style of prayer. For example, some of us chose to read from the Bible while others chose to read poems or selections from works of literature. But our group prayer lacked the true sharing that had always defined spirituality for me. It seemed as if we were simply going through the motions in order to satisfy one of the prescribed practices of community living as handed down to us by our program supervisors.

When we began to really listen to each other and meet each other at our most vulnerable points, we grew as a spiritual community. When we finally went beyond merely tolerating each other's approach toward prayer and really began to embrace the wonderful range of experience and wisdom contained in those different approaches, we moved forward as a community of believers.

It took the efforts of one of our boldest community members to force us to openly communicate with one another in prayer. A watershed experience that liberated community prayer came during one of our weekly meetings. We had all gathered in the living room and had made the usual preparations for prayer. The week had been a rather trying one for all of us and the demands of communal living were making the situation harder to bear. But that evening our burdens were made lighter by the beautiful experience of true sharing through prayer. The prayer, a few paragraphs from one of my fellow volunteer's journal, instantly captured the spirit of prayer we so desperately needed in our community. By reading her own creative writing, she shared with all of us her talent as an author. That evening, we were able to celebrate her ability as a writer. More importantly, we were able to relate our own talents and gifts to God's amazing love for us. As a result of her sharing that evening, we not only bonded as a community, but also realized the liberating power of a broader understanding of prayer and spirituality.

"The week had been a rather trying one for all of us and the demands of communal living were making the situation harder to bear."

As a result of my experiences with group prayer that year, I have been better able to let go of the notion that one style of prayer is more effective than any other. I became more aware of the vastly different expressions of spirituality contained within the school community where I served as a volunteer. I also came to appreciate this diversity within the Catholic tradition. ✚

Questions for Tim's Article:

- Tim's community really came together when they openly shared themselves and were willing to be vulnerable, e.g., when one of Tim's housemates read aloud from her journal. To what extent does your community openly communicate with one another in prayer? What nurtures the spiritual growth of your community?
- Prior to volunteering, Tim mainly expressed his spirituality through three elements: the Catholic Mass, the sacraments and prayer. As Tim learned, community living can introduce us to new and creative expressions of spirituality. What are some new and creative ways you and/or your volunteer community have expressed your faith?
- Discuss with your housemates or fellow volunteer co-workers the reasons why each of you chose the particular volunteer program that you did. How important was the program's religious or spiritual identity? How can your community reconcile your different priorities?
- Name specific obstacles that hinder you from sharing in your community's spirituality. How can you work through these obstacles? Are there aspects of your spirituality you'd like to share? Other forms of spirituality you'd like to explore?
- How do you see your understanding of spirituality evolving as a result of your experiences with community living? Simple living? Volunteer service? Solidarity with the poor?

MOVIES THAT 'REELY' MATTER

This following activity has been modified from its original version. It has been formatted to help you think!

Discuss with friends or fellow volunteers one or two movies that have challenged, enriched or strengthened your spirituality.

Watch one or more of the movies that you discuss or try one from the list below.

How did it challenge you?
How did it make you question your faith or religion?
What else did you learn from the film?

Our Picks:
At Play in the Fields of the Lord, The Mission, Dead Man Walking, Babette's Feast, The Green Mile, Schindler's List, Romero, Jesus Christ Superstar, Keeping the Faith, The Power of One, Entertaining Angels, Lilies of the Field, others?

(If you're not a movie-goer, try the same activity but consider your favorite books.)

Sharing from the Heart

So you've been living in community or doing service with the same group of people for quite some time now - perhaps half of a year, maybe a year and a half. But how well do you really know each other? Try the following fun activity to test yourself and see how much you know, or don't know. You'll probably be surprised!

Materials needed: pens and paper. Time needed: 30 - 45 minutes.

- Gather with your fellow volunteers or with a group of friends. Designate one person to read the six questions below. After each question is read, each person should take a minute to write down his/her answer on a slip of paper. Place the slips of paper in six separate piles, keeping all the answers to the same question in its designated pile.

1. Who is one of your favorite heroes or saints? Why?
2. What is your favorite form of prayer?
3. How do you experience God's presence?
4. How would you most like to spend a day off?
5. What is one aspect of your faith that you really appreciate?
6. Of the 7 deadly sins (greed, lust, gluttony, sloth, wrath, envy and pride), which one gives you the most trouble?

- After answers to all the questions have been written and made into piles, each person should choose one answer from the first question pile. After someone reads aloud the first question, each person takes a turn reading the answer each selected. As a group, try to guess whose answer was just read. Repeat for the other 5 questions.

How well does your community really know each other? Are there relationships that need to be nourished? Try creating your own questions to tackle issues that might be more pertinent to your group.

Retreat... Back to God and Each Other

Here's a thought:

It's not so unusual for volunteers and missioners to become somewhat stagnant in their spiritual life while serving in a faith-based program. So, if you're not feeling fully alive and connected or if your spiritual hopes and expectations aren't being met, don't be too alarmed - it happens a lot!

A retreat might be needed to figure out what's missing and to re-evaluate your priorities. Consider using some of the ideas in this activity to plan a retreat with fellow volunteers in your community or where you work.

A few groundrules:

Everyone attending should participate in the planning process.
Each person should choose at least one thing that will happen while on the retreat.
Try to include different kinds of activities (e.g., group discussion and sharing, dining together, outdoor activities, games, journaling, quiet/alone time, group and individual prayer, music, etc.).

In addition to your own ideas, here are a few activities you might like to try:

Take a Prayer Walk

Either individually or with the whole group, take a long walk outdoors. Do it in silence. Be aware of everything you see, hear and smell. As you walk, remind yourself that everything around you is a gift from God. When you arrive at a pre-set destination, sing a song of praise or thanksgiving. Allow God's love to flow through you.

Quotes Worth Questioning

Reflect on each (or a few) of the spiritual quotations below. Read them aloud and discuss what they mean to you and how they challenge you.

- God is "insane" with Love and Mercy towards us. What shall we do at the sign of such ineffable and infinite Love and Mercy? - St. Vincent Pallotti
- If you understand who you are, you understand what your birthright is, and you understand what God wants you to be. - unknown
- The highest ideal of humanity is the will of God. - unknown
- If you could envision the type of person God wanted you to be you would rise up and never be the same again. - unknown
- Christ's stumbling while carrying the cross reminds us how close the Lord will push us to our absolute limits. - unknown
- The key to faith is what we are willing to sacrifice to obtain it. - Elder Cloward
- Sin has many tools, but a lie is the handle that fits them all. - Oliver Wendell Holmes
- Those who would find truth must: desire it, pray for it, study it, practice it. - unknown
- We have really learned how to pray when we realize that prayer is a privilege rather than a duty. - unknown
- Hell is truth seen too late. - unknown
- You will come to know that what appears today to be a sacrifice will prove instead to be the greatest investment that you will ever make.
- Gordon B. Hinkley

Topics for Discussion

- Share how your talents and gifts have been expressions of your spirituality.
- Share with one another your favorite aspects of the local community's spirituality.
- Consider discussing some of the questions at the ends of the two stories in this issue of *Shared Visions*.

New Ways to Pray

Gather the whole group together and pair off. Describe to your partner your favorite way to pray. Then, go off individually and try your partner's prayer style. Gather back with the whole group. Each person describe their reactions.

The Meaning of Life

Below is an excerpt from Simone Weil's "The Love of God and Affliction," where she describes the purpose of creation. How would you describe the purpose of our creation? What are your reactions to her description?

"A day comes when the soul belongs to God, when it not only consents to love but when truly and effectively it loves. Then in its turn it must cross the universe to go to God. The soul does not love like a creature with created love. The love within it is divine, uncreated: for it is the love of God for God that is passing through it. God alone is capable of loving God. We can only consent to give up our own feelings so as to allow free passage in our soul for this love. That is the meaning of denying oneself. We are created for this consent, and for this alone."

Biblical Insight: Prayer as Walking in God's Shoes... And Discovering if *You* Fit in *Them!*

Prayer is traditionally described as "conversation with God." Through prayer, we might assume, we learn something about who God is. Consider, reflect on, or discuss the following four parables in which Jesus seems intent on telling us there is something unusual about God and about how God thinks:

a) The landowner who, throughout the day, hires vineyard workers but pays them equal pay for unequal work, with the last getting the same pay as the first (Mt 20: 1-6).
b) The good Samaritan, a heretic, who Jesus praises, while the "good" priest and other "religious" folk deserve blame (Lk 10: 29-37).
c) The prodigal son who the father rewards even though that son squandered his inheritance (Lk 15: 11-32).
d) The crafty steward who lowered peoples' debt so he'd have friends when his master fired him and left him unemployed (Lk 16: 1-8).

Think about times when you are praying: describe the characteristics of God to Whom you pray. How do Jesus' images* of God fit with your images of God? To what extent do you believe God is as Jesus' parables portray God? Over the next weeks, meditate on each of these parables or others of Jesus' stories and see if you can fit into "Jesus' shoes," that is, into His images of God.

*hint: Jesus' God is irrationally generous, extraordinarily forgiving and applauding of unorthodox members of the "out crowd."

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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. Local 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.*

INSIDE: Stories and activities to nurture the spiritual development of lay volunteers and missioners!

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